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THE WORDS OF THE ANGELS.



THE  
WORDS OF THE ANGELS

OR

*THEIR VISITS TO THE EARTH, AND THE  
MESSAGES THEY DELIVERED*

By RUDOLF STIER, D.D.

AUTHOR OF

“THE WORDS OF THE LORD JESUS,” “COMMENTARY ON ST. JAMES,” ETC. ETC.

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THE

WORDS OF THE ANGELS

OR

THEIR MESSAGES TO THE MORTAL WORLD

BY THE ANGELS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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# CONTENTS.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION, . . . . .	vii

## PART I.

### THE HISTORICAL BOOKS.

#### CHAPTER I.

Gabriel's Announcement to Zacharias—Luke I., . . . .	3
--	---

#### CHAPTER II.

Gabriel's Announcement to Mary—Luke I., . . . .	21
---	----

#### CHAPTER III.

Appearance of the Angel to Joseph in a Dream—Matthew I., . . . .	27
--	----

#### CHAPTER IV.

The Angels that announce the Birth of Christ at Bethlehem—Luke II., . . . .	47
---	----

#### CHAPTER V.

The Angel returns to Joseph in Dreams—Matthew II., . . . .	61
--	----

#### CHAPTER VI.

The Angels at the Sepulchre—Matt. xxviii., Mark xvi., Luke xxiv., . . . .	72
---	----

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## CHAPTER VII.

	PAGE
The Angel's Question to Magdalene—John xx., . . . . .	91

## CHAPTER VIII.

The Angels at the Ascension—Acts i., . . . . .	94
--	----

## CHAPTER IX.

The Angel opening the Prison Doors—Acts v., . . . . .	103
---	-----

## CHAPTER X.

The Angel directing Philip—Acts viii., . . . . .	110
--	-----

## CHAPTER XI.

The Angel sent to Cornelius—Acts x., . . . . .	116
--	-----

## CHAPTER XII.

The Angel delivering Peter—Acts xii., . . . . .	127
---	-----

## CHAPTER XIII.

The Angel to Paul at Sea—Acts xxvii., . . . . .	135
---	-----

## PART II.

## THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN.

## CHAPTER XIV.

The Praise of the Four Living Creatures—Revelation iv., . . . . .	147
---	-----

## CHAPTER XV.

Who is worthy to open the Book?—Revelation v., . . . . .	153
--	-----

## CHAPTER XVI.

	PAGE
The Praise of many Angels, and the Amen of the Four Living Creatures—Revelation v., . . . . .	150

## CHAPTER XVII.

The Fourfold Call—Come and See—Revelation vi., . . . . .	164
--	-----

## CHAPTER XVIII.

The Angel having the Seal for the Servants of God—Revelation vii., . . . . .	168
--	-----

## CHAPTER XIX.

The Worship of all the Angels—Revelation vii., . . . . .	175
--	-----

## CHAPTER XX.

The Threefold Woe—Revelation viii., . . . . .	177
---	-----

## CHAPTER XXI.

The Angel with the Little Book open—Revelation x., . . . . .	183
--	-----

## CHAPTER XXII.

The Three Angels that herald the Fall of Babylon—Revelation xiv., . . . . .	192
---	-----

## CHAPTER XXIII.

The Two Angels at the Thrusting in of the Sickles—Revelation xiv., . . . . .	204
--	-----

## CHAPTER XXIV.

The Angel of the Waters praises God's Justice—Revelation xvi., . . . . .	209
--	-----

## CHAPTER XXV.

The Angel who shows the Mystic Babylon—Revelation xvii., . . . . .	214
--	-----

## CHAPTER XXVI.

	PAGE
The Two Angels at the Fall of Babylon—Revelation xviii, . . . . .	228

## CHAPTER XXVII.

The Angel refusing to be Worshipped—Revelation xix., . . . . .	235
--	-----

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

The Angel in the Sun summoning the Birds to the Great Supper— Revelation xix., . . . . .	243
---	-----

## CHAPTER XXIX.

The Great Voice out of Heaven—Revelation xxi., . . . . .	246
--	-----

## CHAPTER XXX.

The Interposing Voice—Revelation xxi., . . . . .	252
--	-----

## CHAPTER XXXI.

The Angel showing the Bride—Revelation xxi., . . . . .	254
--	-----

## CHAPTER XXXII.

The last Angelic Speech—Revelation xxii., . . . . .	257
---	-----

## INTRODUCTION.

It is a striking fact, that neither in ancient nor modern literature have we any work of precisely the same character as that which I now undertake,—a work dealing exclusively with the authentic words addressed by angels to men, and recorded by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Indeed no monograph even on the Biblical doctrine respecting angels has ever come before me. We have treatises and dissertations, it is true, but no exhaustive book; and even these are exceedingly meagre in their notices of the intercourse of holy angels with the human race. They are rather to be classed under the head of demonology, and *historiae diaboli*; whereas, in the Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, we have more told us of good than of evil spirits. Indeed, to say nothing of unbelieving and half-believing indifference, we constantly find, even in orthodox believers, an actual ignoring, as it were, of angelic agency. Now, we hold that it would much add, both to the full understanding and joy of faith, if the testimony of Scripture on the subject were properly received. For throughout its pages the existence and intervention of angels is dwelt upon with as much clearness and precision as is compatible with the necessarily mysterious nature of the subject.

Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, as we are well

aware, repeatedly brought the intervention of holy angels before the minds of his hearers. In parables, the interpretation of which must at all events point at realities, we find angels described as the reapers at the last harvest, the executors of the last sentence, the devoted servants of the heavenly Master; nay, in the latest prophecy (Matt. xxv.), their accompanying the coming-in glory of the Judges (ver. 31), can no more be understood as a metaphor than the mention, in ver. 41, of the devil and his angels.

We may here quote with advantage a striking remark of Nitzsch on the subject in question: "If," writes he, "we consider the origin of the Old Testament representation of angels, we shall certainly not be able to hold the opinion that the angels were nothing more than the gods of Polytheism, subordinated by the growth of Monotheism to this inferior position. For if this were so, we should find the angelic world most prominent at the time of transition from the polytheistic to the monotheistic creed; whereas it is at a later period, just when Polytheism is completely overcome, that we find the existence of angels reduced to a dogma by the Jews, and their appearance most frequently recorded." Most certainly this is the case. The angels by no means recede into comparative obscurity as clear light breaks in; but on the contrary, it is on the occasion of the full revelation of God in Christ, that they appear with increased distinctness. And in the same manner with regard to the objective, personal devil, his image, instead of waxing fainter, is dwelt on and defined far more than heretofore, both in the parables and the doctrinal teaching of Christ.

No sooner, indeed, had our Lord appeared in his public character of teacher, and gathered around him his earliest disciples, than we find him spontaneously alluding to the

far-off vision of the patriarch Jacob (John i. 51), and personally applying it. He points to his own Divine Humanity as the centre of this spiritual intercourse continually carried on between earth and heaven; and on one occasion, previous to his last prophecy (Matt. xxiv. 30; xxv. 31), speaks openly of the coming of the Son of man *with his angels* (Matt. xvi. 27; Mark viii. 38).

In short, neither the inquiries of science, nor the inductions of reason, tend to disprove the great fact, equally transcending the telescope of the one, and the speculations of the other,—the fact of the universe being peopled with intermediate spirits between God and man. It is only a meagre pseudo-philosophical Pantheism, which would contract the starry heaven to a great light-eruption (according to Hegel's notorious words, *Licht Anschlag*), and render God conscious only in man! which must needs protest against a doctrine so essentially conservative of Monotheism as this of worshipping and ministering angels.

Even in Von Meyer's works we meet with a most inaccurate observation on this subject, *i.e.*, that no time is assigned in Scripture to the creation of angels, which leaves it to be inferred that they have existed from the beginning. Now, that, in the beginning, God, together with heaven itself, created the whole of the host of heaven, is most clearly stated, Gen. i. 1, ii. 1, compared with Ps. xxxiii. 6; Neh. ix. 6.

But the manner of creation of the invisible world (Col. i. 16), must remain hidden from us, because we are not at present capable of understanding any revelation of it. One bright glance, indeed, is allowed us of the singing and shouting for joy of the earliest existing sons of God, the morning stars of primeval creation, over the laying the foundations of this present world of ours (Job xxxviii. 7).

Again, in Gen. vi. 1-4, we have a most mysterious yet, no doubt, literally true account given us of a second fall in the world of angels; of which, however, we will not speak any further here, since it is with the *holy* angels that we have to do, and with their sayings to men, which sayings are far more rare in Scripture than the general mention of their existence and services. Now, human tradition and human poetry would have reversed this.

The primal belief that angels were wont to help and serve mankind, and to do so, be it well observed, by the command and the sending of God, we find in Gen. xxiv. 7, 40, simply alluded to by Abraham as a self-evident fact; and in like manner in the book of Tobit we see that the popular belief among the Jews lies at the foundation of that Apocryphal narrative. Again, Jacob beholds the heavenly company at the beginning of his pilgrimage, and at the end of his exile, both dreaming at Bethel and waking at Mahanaim (Gen. xxviii. 12; xxxii. 1, 2). That the angels of the Lord encamp around them that fear him, to keep them in all their ways, seems to be a well-known truth, not taught as anything new, but comfortingly alluded to as a certain fact (Ps. xxxiv. 8; xci. 11). The *watchers* around the lofty throne of the Divine Governor, who receive and execute his behests, as Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream (Dan. iv. 13-17), are not merely a specimen of Chaldean imagery, incorporated in holy writ, but are akin to those chariots of God before mentioned (Ps. lxxviii. 17). Micaiah the son of Imlah (1 Kings xxii. 19), sees just the same vision of the Lord on his throne, surrounded by the hosts of heaven, that Daniel beheld at a later period (Dan. vii. 10). The *saints* in Dan. viii. 13 (Zech. xiv. 5 compared with Deut. xxxiii. 2) we find spoken of in the same way in Ps. lxxxix. 5, 7 and Job xv. 15, v. 1; in which last place



we have a very significant allusion to the prohibited invocation of angels as being idolatrous and useless. If sometimes these angels are called *Elohim*, or children of God, that is, according to the Hebrew idiom, God-like; this is intended to express their exalted dignity as the official representatives of God, certainly not to attribute to them a share in the divine nature or independent power. Such a misunderstanding as this is guarded against by the name most generally applied to them, *Angels*, *i.e.*, messengers and ministers, or in their oldest and most comprehensive designation, God's army, God's hosts (Gen. xxxii. 2; Ps. ciii. 20, 21; cxlviii. 2). And even God the Lord adds to his name this most solemn and impressive title of *Sabaoth*, in other words, the God and Governor of these hosts of heaven. Finally, we have the definition of the name of *angel* given to us in Heb. i. 14, with reference to their especial work as messengers from heaven to earth.

Now, we must be careful to distinguish between these commissioned and also created spirits and the *Angel of the Lord*, whom we find in the Old Testament appearing as the personal manifestation of the Triune God, the God of God, the visible image of the Invisible, the Captain of the Lord's host (Josh. v. 14), and thus himself the God of Sabaoth. That this Angel of the Lord is no created angel, remains an incontrovertible truth, although, strange to say, even believers have sometimes questioned it. To insist upon the word *angel* in this case, overlooking the divine element, to see here only a created representative of the Deity, appears to me unauthorized, such an interpretation entirely doing away with the partition-wall between the created and the Creator. Again, Heb. i. 1, 2, by no means authorizes the belief held by some that God did *not*, in the

Old Testament, speak by his Son as well as by angels. In the first place, he can speak in no other way than through the eternal *Word*; and next, we have apostolic expressions like those in John xii. 41 (*his* glory, Christ's, ver. 42); and 1 Cor. x. 4, 9, which prove that He *did*. From Gen. xvi. and Job down to Malachi, we find scattered throughout the whole Old Testament isolated yet harmonizing descriptions, which, at once in their mystery and their clearness, testify of Him who condescended indeed to appear in the form of an angel, and to be called one, yet who was no angel, but God himself sent, proceeding from God concealed. Let the following passages be read very attentively: Gen. xvi. 13; xxii. 12; Ex. iii. 6, 7; and let Ex. xiii. 21 be compared with xiv. 19; xxiii. 21. Remark also how the prophet Hosea (xii. 5, 6) names Jehovah the God of Sabaoth, him whom we find (Gen. xxxii.) spoken of as a man (ver. 24), and again as God (ver. 30); how in Hosea (xii. 5) the expression is *the* (well-known, so called) Angel (again, see how the two expressions stand side by side in Gen. xlviii. 15, 16; the *God* before whom my fathers did walk, the *Angel* who redeemed me from evil), the angel, namely, in whom God's name is (Ex. xxiii. 21); the Angel of God's *presence* (Isa. lxiii. 9), *i.e.*, God's own presence (Ex. xxxiii. 14). We can now understand the majestic tone in which the Angel of the Lord speaks on the occasion of his very remarkable appearance recorded in Judges ii. 1, "*I* made you to go up out of Egypt!" And we have similar instances in the history of Gideon and Manoah, as also in that of Elijah (2 Kings i. 3-15).

The Angel of the Lord referred to in all these cases is spoken of in Job as the *mediating angel* (in the English Bible, a messenger, an interpreter) who has *found a ransom*. Finally, in Mal. iii. 1, he is spoken of as the Angel

of the covenant, one with the Lord himself, who is to come to *his* temple.

Thus the sayings of this *Angel of the Lord* have no place in our present book. In many passages of Scripture it seems somewhat doubtful at the first glance whether he, or a created angel be alluded to, but, on reflection, the context or parallel passages will enable us to decide, as, for example, in Gen. xxi. 17, compared with xxxi. 11, 13. In Numb. xxii., let especial attention be paid to the use of the word *I*, in ver. 32, 33, 35.

According to the repeated and unvarying testimony of Scripture, numbers of created angels are busily employed in the affairs of humanity, not only in the lifetime of our Lord (the centre of the history of salvation, but also before and after). The Old Testament appears, indeed, in a special manner the dispensation of angels, as we have three times stated in Gal. iii. 19; Acts vii. 53; Heb. ii. 2. But this intervention of theirs, this their character of servants, appointed to execute the divine will and plans, is taught us alike in the oldest and latest of the sacred writings in their own characteristic way; not, indeed, by positive doctrinal statement, so much as by illustration and context. Thus we learn that the whole of nature is not merely governed by natural forces and laws, but that the immanent Creator acts upon all these *by intermediate agents*. It is in this especial sense that these spirits who direct the course of nature receive the appellation of *powers*. The angel at the pool of Bethesda is no myth, for, in Rev. xvi. 5, we have the positive mention of an angel of the water, as well as angels of the wind (vii. 1, compared with ix. 14). Lastly, in Dan. x. 18, 20, 21, xii. 1, we read of other angels who are commissioned to guide the affairs of individual nations, for whom they fight, a fact

which, unintelligible as it is to us, we are bound to receive together with all other words of inspiration respecting the mysteries of God's wonderfully ordered creation.

That in this great world of spirits there should be degrees, differences of rank, as well as of administration, we might naturally have concluded, even if the Scriptures had not revealed it, not, indeed, by laying it down as a fact, in so many words, but by numerous allusions and slight touches which it is our part to search out diligently, and draw our own inferences from; but yet with caution and humility, lest we intrude into those things that we have not seen (Col. ii. 18). The clearest allusions that we find are in the passages that simply enumerate thrones, principalities, powers, dominions (Eph. i. 21; iii. 10; Col. i. 16; ii. 10; of authorities and powers, 1 Pet. iii. 22; Dan. iv. 32). As to the comparative nature and rank of archangels (1 Thess. iv. 16; Jude 9), and that of the seven in Rev. viii. 2, it is not easy to decide, though, with respect to the latter, a careful comparing with Tob. xii. 15, may teach us some respect for apocryphal tradition. Some recent commentators have, on very doubtful authority, sought to distinguish between the *strong* angels and the *ministering* angels (Ps. ciii. 20, 21), as though they were two separate classes, but in Ps. lxxviii. 25 (in the original), *all* angels are alike designated as strong. We may here take occasion to protest against the popular error, which would divide the whole angelic world into the two orders of cherubim and seraphim, for which there is no authority in holy writ; as well as against the unworthy idea put forth by some, that the cherubim are mere creatures of the imagination, intended to convey a figurative impression of the greatness and majesty of God. We hope to present to our readers a more true and lofty theory than this.

Others would have us distinguish between angels of *might* and angels of *knowledge*, but it is by no means easy to lay down any positive line of demarcation between these. For in several passages we find that a knowledge far exceeding the present knowledge or wisdom of men, is attributed to all angels whatsoever (2 Sam. xiv. 17, 20; xix. 27; 1 Sam. xxix. 9). Indeed this had become an expression proverbial in Israel, and we find it confirmed, while also limited in the New Testament. Our Lord himself in Matt. xxiv. 36; Mark xiii. 32, confirms the general presupposition of the angels in heaven having a widely extended knowledge, yet adds this limitation, that they do not know the day nor the hour of judgment. And again, both Paul and Peter agree in giving us to understand that the angels, holy and wise though they be, have not so deep an insight into the mysteries of salvation as those children of men whose destiny these more especially concern; that the less complex existence of the former continually finds an interest in watching the history of the church on earth; and that they worship before the throne of grace with something of an unappeased thirst for more intimate knowledge (Eph. iii. 10; 1 Peter i. 12). Amongst their orders there is very possibly an ascending scale from those, who although happy, and after their kind perfect spirits, are yet simply serving agencies or powers, to those who are called to and fitted for the deepest insight and the fullest knowledge. Thus perhaps, for it does not become us to speak positively here, the *four* living creatures *whose spirit was in the wheels* (Ezek. i.), really denote four primal forces of created life, nature-spirits in creation, free, personal, self-conscious intermediate agents, to whom the divine power was delegated for the government of the material world. If so, these may certainly be divided into angels of grace and

angels of truth, of mercy, and of judgment; that is, they may be viewed as representatives in action of all these alike (Ps. lxxxix. 15), though it is no less true that *angels of evil* (Ps. lxxviii. 49), must in wrath remember mercy, while, on the other hand, the messengers of grace and peace are conversant with the stern exercise of justice, as we see from the story of Mamre and Sodom.

But how little of all the treasures of this angelic world is revealed in Scripture history. How seldom, if we consider it as a whole, have we any details afforded us of angel nature or angel work. How few angel words are recorded. We are told indeed in Luke xv. 7, 10, by our Lord himself, that the angels rejoice in *each* sinner's repentance, feel a sympathizing delight in the recovery of every single human soul: this great truth flashes out in these words; is apparent nowhere else. In Matt. xviii. 10, we are positively told that the children of Adam have guardian angels specially appointed, but in no other passage of Scripture have we any further allusion to this most comforting, most edifying mystery. (For Acts xii. 15 is to be differently understood.) The seer of Patmos beheld indeed the prayers of the saints being presented by an angel; but we only once read elsewhere of this interposition, in Dan. ix. 23; x. 12, though we find an allusion made to the universal belief in the fact, in the apocryphal story of Tobit (Tob. xii. 12). That angels have their appointed offices, both at the death of the righteous and the ungodly, we learn from Luke xvi. 22, taken in connexion with chap. xii. 20, where the literal meaning is, "they shall require thy soul;" but it is only in the case of Herod (Acts xii. 23), in that of the Assyrian host (2 Kings xix. 35), in the plagues of Egypt, Ex. xii. 23 (Heb. xi. 28), and story of the pestilence in Israel (2 Sam.

xxiv. 16, 17), that we read expressly of their being the executioners of the divine judgment. And it is Jude alone who gives us any hint of the contention of Michael with Satan for the body of Moses.

Again, it was long after Mahanaim that the camping of the heavenly hosts, under the aspect of horses and chariots of fire, was once more revealed to one of the young men of the prophets (2 Kings vi. 17). It is only in Dan. iii. 25, that the *son of the gods* shows himself in the furnace with the faithful three, to which cases may be added the two instances of celestial intervention of liberation from prison by angelic agency in the Acts of the Apostles. What a reticence, what a paucity in Holy Scripture of what scepticism would ascribe merely to human imagination. Had the angels indeed been mere myths, forms originating in poetry and preserved by tradition, why was there not in the Bible the same prominence given to them that we find in apocryphal literature; for example, in the book of Tobit and the fourth book of Ezra. The book of Tobit is full of beauty and significance, but the episode of the angel who makes journeys here and there, and utters lengthy discourses, at once proves its apocryphal origin. In our own days, when fictitious *spirits* are so singularly garrulous, we cannot lay too much stress upon biblical reserve.

And, lastly, when we consider the *words* of angels, how short they are, how adapted to human comprehension in their simplicity, and yet always with a deeper meaning concealed beneath the primary one. Alas! commentators for the most part have passed over these words very lightly, noticing them merely as angelic words, not pausing to weigh their inherent value, so that our exposition has had the benefit of very little previous labour in this department.

Again, all the accounts given of the appearance of angels, are characterized by the same directness and simplicity. It is only in the matter of dreams and visions that we meet with apocalyptic imagery; as, for instance, in the accounts of the seraphim and cherubim, as well as in that of Jacob's ladder; but where angels are introduced to the normal, waking consciousness of men, we do not find that they are seen flying down from heaven, or that there is anything marvellous in their deportment. It is true that before the eyes of Manoah and his wife, the angel ascended in the flame of the altar, but then this was the uncreated angel of the Lord, and his *doing wondrously* was necessary to bring about their entire conviction of the truth of his message. Compare with this the sublime Christmas celebration recorded in Luke ii.; the beginning in ver. 9, with its conclusion, ver. 15. Again, we usually read of a man, two men, of a young man (Mark xvi.); we hear nothing of wings, or of flying, or of any of the adjuncts by which the imagination of artists is wont to mar the simple Bible narratives.

If it be inquired whether angels have a corporeal nature, we may reply that it is almost certain that no created and finite being (including those intelligences that in contradistinction to our humanity we call purely spiritual) can exist without some material substance, which, indeed, is the condition of *form*, and form is implied in the words, "*their own habitation*" (see Jude 6). The often misunderstood passage in Ps. civ. 4, is peculiarly fraught with veiled meaning. In the first place, it speaks of actual wind and flame as ministers of the Lord; thus illustrating the angelic power and swiftness, and also mysteriously conveying by these types some idea of the higher corporeal nature of these exalted angelic beings. That they are not created out



of the dust, like the children of Adam, we read, moreover, in Job iv. 18, 19. But *how* are they created and formed? Here all our knowledge is at fault; only there are two hints in God's word which lead us to suppose that the *human* shape, as the form of forms, the original type of the rational creation, may be peculiar to the angels also. We read of the children of the resurrection being made like unto the angels, Luke xx. 36; (Matt. xxii. 30; Mark xii. 25), and this, from the nature of the context, evidently refers to the body; while Rev. xxi. 17 harmonizes therewith, it being there said of "*the measure of a man* (a risen, glorified man), *that is, of the angel.*"

It is also noticeable that in the Old Testament, angels, if they do not simply reveal themselves in the human form, have a *fiery* appearance, while in the New Testament, on the contrary, from the scene of the resurrection of the Saviour (for in Luke ii. 9 there is a verbal difference in the description) they appear in *shining* raiment, or in bright light (Acts xii. 7). And this may have some connexion with the reconciling of all things through Christ, both things in earth and things in heaven (Col. i. 20).

That angels actually spoke to men, we find to have been a popular belief in Christ's time, recognised in John xii. 29, as also in Acts xxiii. 9, with which we may compare 1 Kings xiii. 18, and in a manner Gal. i. 8 as well. It is evident that, in order to have been understood by men, they must necessarily have used human language, and not spoken in their own peculiar tongues, which we find alluded to (1 Cor. xiii. 1). This remark applies also to the two angelic names, translated for our comprehension into those of Gabriel and Michael, to which the Apocrypha adds the two other names, formed on the same plan, of Raphael and Uriel. But, once more, let us ask where, throughout the

mythology and poetry of Paganism, Judaism, or Christendom, we find anything comparable in simplicity and dignity to the Bible narratives of the appearance and sayings of angels? Poets and Painters have indeed their artistic right to idealize and adorn, but they ought only to fill up the Bible outline, instead of, as is too often the case, altogether departing from it.

Our purpose, in the work we now lay before our readers, is to bring to light the deep meaning which we believe the simplest angelic sayings to contain, the treasures that lie beneath the seeming commonplace surface. In order to do this, we shall sometimes have to rectify the common version of the sacred text. We hope thus to be able to present the collective words of the angels under a new aspect, and to afford another proof that the Holy Scriptures, despite the variety of their inspired writers, are in point of fact one organic whole, one Revelation.

The Words of the Angels.



PART I.

THE HISTORICAL BOOKS OF THE  
NEW TESTAMENT.



## CHAPTER I.

### GABRIEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT TO ZACHARIAS.

#### LUKE I.

THE Lord himself is about to come ; the Lord of eternal glory in the bosom of the Father, before the foundation of the world, is to come into the world, clothed in the flesh of Adam's fallen race, with a *coming* essentially different from any other of which we have hitherto heard. A work has now to be accomplished wondrous above all wonders ; events are to take place whose inexhaustible interest will for ever claim and repay the eternal "looking into" of men and angels, earth and heaven. What marvel, then, that those heavenly servants, who continually wait his pleasure (see how the Lord, then a King in bonds, speaks of them, John xviii. 36), should make themselves known to the children of men more palpably, frequently, intimately than heretofore ? There is no need of laborious argument or elaborate proof to establish this ; every heart susceptible of the impressions a devoted student of Scripture receives, will at once own the difference, will recognise and feel the increased tenderness and dignity combined, which the heavenly messengers henceforth manifest to the sons of men. Nor is it possible for a godly simplicity to protest too strongly against all well-meaning but unbecoming

criticism, all fanciful interpretation, that may detract from the literal, plain, but profound historical character of the narrative before us. It is not with shapes projected by the inherent force of the human intellect—art-creations resulting from sense-experience—that we have to deal; nor yet is it with images and sounds evoked within the human consciousness by supernatural influence, and thrown into a simple historical form, that the grand history of salvation opens. It is with the words and deeds of angels themselves; of separate and independent beings, in a marvellous and miraculous manner no doubt, but yet in very deed and truth manifesting themselves as objective realities to man. As the human race was originally created to carry out God's gracious purpose concerning it, against the powers of a fallen spirit-world, so good spirits, in their several vocations, were appointed to serve mankind with a most intimate and special interest. And as the *God-man*—as from all eternity ordained Mediator in the work of salvation, the human form (as it was in its pristine and will be in its restored glory) is permanently worthy to be assumed by angels when they appear to men; nay, more, as the original and typical form of all corporeity, it is in all probability already their own, or will ultimately become so, in order to fit them for our eternal companionship.

In the collective historical books of the Old Testament, we only find the appearance of *speaking* angels recorded thrice, while in the gospel narrative we read of at least eight distinct angelic addresses, and in the Acts of the Apostles of five. The birth of the Saviour is both predicted and proclaimed; his first journeys are prescribed; his resurrection and his ascension are alike declared. During the course of Christ's ministry, however, we have no angelic communications made to us; for although the Lord

asserts that a constant ascending and descending of angels between him and the opened heaven is being carried on (John i. 51), and we feel that this is so throughout the heavenly career of the Son of man—since we hear of ministering angels in the desert, strengthening angels at Gethsemane, and are well entitled to imagine how angels watched over and waited on his childhood, as it silently matured into the consciousness of his divine humanity—yet of all this increased and exalted angelic intercourse little comparatively is directly granted to man.

Gabriel, the prince who had already once appeared towards the end of the Old Testament, stands out foremost as annunciator at the beginning of the New; and it is the birth of the forerunner that he first announces, that, agreeably to the order of nature, the dawn should precede the sunrising. The pre-natal history of Jesus, as well as the preparatory events we are now considering, are given us with greatest minuteness by St. Luke, whose purpose it was to set all things in order from the beginning. His Gospel, addressed to Theophilus, has a certain private character about it, and brings out many details passed over by the first public witnesses to Christ. And how self-evidencing, how unparalleled by the most cunningly-devised fables (2 Pet. i. 16) of man, is the historical truth of the record! We adopt the words of Pfenninger: "How solemnly, how divinely, the holy drama of a new revelation opens! An angel from heaven, a man on earth,—these are invariably the two chief characters in the sacred story; heaven acting upon earth, man brought into contact with the beings of the invisible world. On one hand, an Israelite, one of the peculiar people to whom the promises belong; more, one of its priests appointed to plead for God to man, and for man to God; one specially

chosen out of the chosen nation. On the other, 'I, Gabriel, that stand before the presence of God.' The scene is the most sacred spot of the whole earth, of the Land of Promise, of the city of the Great King, namely, the sanctuary of God's house; and here, in the most holy retirement, an announcement is made, a dialogue held between the two, by the altar of incense—type of the worship of the saints—in the hour of public prayer, while Israel is imploring the blessing of Jehovah. Could the opening of the divine New Testament drama be more solemn, more appropriate, more Israelitish, more sacred, either as regards person, place, time, or action?"

Zacharias is the representative of the priesthood of Israel as Simeon of its prophets. No priest could be found more worthy to receive the earliest message. The marvellously late birth of the forerunner serves as a transition to the miraculous birth of the Son of God; serves as a sign to confirm the faith of the Virgin Mother (ver. 36). The pious sacerdotal pair unconsciously prophesy by the very names they bear: Zacharias, *i.e.*, *The Lord remembers*, happily combines with Elisabeth (or Elisheba, as in Exodus vi. 23, the wife of Aaron, the ancestress of the whole priesthood), *i.e.*, *God of the oath*, the covenant. In both the songs of praise contained in this opening chapter, we may observe the allusion made by the Holy Spirit to these two names.

It is probable that this first appearance took place at the time of the evening sacrifice, for it was at that hour, five hundred years before, that the same Gabriel announced from afar the coming of Messiah to Daniel the prophet. At all events, commentators have no ground for supposing that on account of the sudden dumbness of Zacharias, the people waiting without were deprived of the priestly bene-



diction, for it is highly probable that this was bestowed only in the morning.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise Luke would surely have alluded to this benediction, whereas he gives us to understand that the priest's speechlessness only prevented his explaining the reason of the long tarrying in the temple that had surprised the people. Again, whether it were morning or evening, surely the omission of the blessing would have been peculiarly inappropriate at such a juncture, so that everything leads us to assume both that the announcement was made in the evening, and that it was not customary then to bestow it. The offering of incense was the symbol that accompanied prayer, so that it was in the sacred exercise of his regular official duties, not in sleep, in a dream, or ecstatic trance, but with mind upraised to God, and, at the same time, collected and calm, that Zacharias saw and heard the angel. There appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the *right* hand of the altar of incense.

This very first fact already promises "good tidings," with which expression the angel's second address closes (ver. 19). His first (ver. 13-17) begins with these words, so frequently made use of in the Old Testament, "*Fear not*," words that here, on the very threshold of the New, obtain even stronger significance. For even the pious Zacharias was afraid, when, through the cloud of incense he saw the majestic form, and at once knew that it was no man who stood there, but an angel of the Lord.

And now, let us consider the exquisite connexion of the whole, the gradually attained climax of the divine message from the lips of the angel from before the throne. The

<sup>1</sup> See Lund's Jewish Sanctuaries, Book III. chap. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus relates a supernatural visitation made to the high-priest, John Hyrcanus, during the offering up of incense; but it was only a voice, not a vision.

messenger of joy begins with the mention of the accepted prayer, promises a son, gives him a high name, foretells for him a distinguished office. But the greatest tidings are yet to come : the longed-for coming of the Messiah, whose fore-runner this child is to be. Again we quote Pfenninger : "How tenderly interwoven, how intimately connected the divine with the human story ! It is one of the chief perfections of a drama that all its occurrences should essentially hang together ; that none of them should appear extraneous or isolated ; and where are these conditions better observed than in the divine narratives of Holy Writ ? The grandest, divinest story in the world blends at its first most human commencement, with the human heart-history of a childless wedded pair, who pray to God for a son." This is certainly true, although the prayer here alluded to can hardly have been confined to such a petition. The heavenly message, however, retrospectively includes former prayers, and has three separate clauses,—first, the birth of a son to Zacharias ; last, the coming of the Lord himself ; and, as connecting link between the two, the announcement that this son shall make ready the way of this very Lord.

"*Fear not, Zacharias : for thy prayer is heard ; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.*"—It was thus that the message to Cornelius the centurion began with the same mention of prayer heard (Acts x. 31) ; and the passage in Daniel (ix. 22, 23) leads us to associate this with angelic interposition. But those who imagine that the prayer of Zacharias here alluded to had reference only to the birth of a son, are probably mistaken. We are inclined rather to conclude, from the doubting expression employed in verse 18, that this wish was well-nigh given up in his old

age. Just as the Gentile, in the midst of his God-fearing and righteous career, prayed earnestly for peace of conscience and forgiveness of sins, so now, in the holy place, the priest of Israel, in his character of intercessor for the people, prayed for the full coming of the promised Deliverer, and he would hardly have mingled his own private petition with this exercise of his priestly office. If it found any place in his heart at such a time, it could only have been in some form like this: "Oh, if my sigh might rise like this incense, a perfume acceptable to the Lord, and that he would come down to visit his people, how gladly would I give up all other wishes of my own!" Nevertheless, the overflow of the divine grace grants his former and subordinated private desire as well; nay, gives it the first place on the list of blessings implored by and granted to the priest's prayer. This promised son is added to a series whose birth has already been miraculously foretold—Isaac, Samson, Samuel. The significant names of both Zacharias and Elisabeth his wife are mentioned by the angel, to point out the rich fulfilment of their prophetic meaning, but the appointed name of this promised son transcends theirs. An era of new and fuller grace begins with him. Later, the name receives its special explanation, in that the stern preacher of repentance is found only to lead from grace to grace. *John* is the last but one of the seven names given by God in Holy Scripture to those still unborn, and the seventh name is *Jesus*.<sup>1</sup>

*"And he (this John) shall be joy and gladness to thee; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy*

<sup>1</sup> Ishmael, Isaac, Solomon, Josiah (1 Kings xiii. 2), Cyrus (Isaiah xlv. 28; xlv. 1), John, Jesus.

*Ghost even from his mother's womb.*"—We at once see in this passage, taken in connexion with verses 16, 17, the difference between the limited and immediate character of the angelic message, and that of a broad prophetic announcement embracing and expressing the whole future consequences of the event. Such a prophecy of the person and offices of the Baptist, could not have spoken only of joy and success; it must needs have dwelt upon the fruitlessness of his mission to the majority, and his own cruel death; while the angel, on the contrary, was appointed to deliver, in the first instance, only glad tidings, to announce the purpose, and means employed by the *grace of God*. In the same manner, this very Gabriel speaks on a later occasion to Mary, only of the person and the kingdom of the Lord Jesus; he says nothing of the cross, or the world at large. And yet it remains not the less true, nor less exactly fulfilled, that not only father, mother, friends, and neighbours did rejoice over John (ver. 58), but *many*, who recognised his prophetic character, and, in a measure, the whole nation, although, alas! it was willing only "for a season to rejoice in his light" (John v. 35), instead of being permanently kindled by his Elias-like zeal. Truly he was and is *great* as the last and greatest prophet (Matt. xi. 11), only not great in a worldly sense (as, for example, was Herod). No; we have a hint given us of an office and a kingdom of quite another character. He was *great before the Lord*. The word thus taken by the sagacious priest, not in its literal sense, but fraught with mysterious import, would recall the men of faith and spiritual power of Israel's good old times, more especially the wondrous champion Samson (Judges xiii.), a rude type, finding an honourable antitype here; for this child too is to be vowed and dedicated to

God. Although the angel makes special allusion to Judges xiii. 4, 5; yet in his subsequent hymn of praise, Zacharias shows that he had clear insight enough not to look for a temporal deliverer from the Roman yoke after the fashion of Samson or Gideon (ver. 77-79). It was as the most severe upholder and preacher of the law at the close of the Old Covenant, whose office it was to prepare the people by repentance for the grace of the New, that John received a life-long consecration to God, the "separation of a Nazarite" (Numb. iv.) Wine and other strong drinks are here placed, as in Eph. v. 18, in opposition to the spirit of which this strenuously active servant of the Lord was to be full; not, indeed, that "Holy Spirit" with which only a mightier than John had power to baptize, but an abundant measure of what, up to this time, had been called, and actually was, a holy spirit in the men of God.

*"And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*—Not only, as before stated, *many* shall rejoice at his birth, but, still further, still better, *many* shall be really converted by him, turned back from the apostasy so deeply felt and lamented by Zacharias and all pious souls. It is not indeed said that he should turn *all* the children of Israel, convert the whole nation; and this limitation of the promise may have occasioned some anxiety on after reflection. But at first, at least, it sounded full of comfort, as when in a shipwreck, or the falling in of a bridge, out of the multitude destroyed, a certain number, thankfully designated as *many*, are known to be saved. It is true, that taken on

a great scale, as regards the result which Gabriel goes on more precisely to indicate as the end and aim of his office, the Baptist's labour was vain ; but, nevertheless, a considerable number—perhaps, with a few exceptions, all those who were struck by the first apostolic sermon and who joined themselves to the church—had been prepared by John. Nay, more, there was a beginning of conversion in the multitudes who listened to his doctrine of repentance, only that they, alas ! were not steadfast in their resolve to turn to the Lord their God. All this is in a manner implied in the indefinite sentence which soon passes on from the result to the character of the Baptist's office. He will begin to point many back to God, for his mission is to prepare *all* the people of Israel (or, at least, out of them a people of the Lord) for the coming Messiah, whose forerunner he is.

We notice an especial emphasis laid in the original upon the word *he*. He, thy son, it is of whom the prophet writes at the close of the Old Testament, that he is to come as forerunner before the coming of the Lord. We may question whether, before the time of the Baptist, any one had attached so special a meaning to the more general expression in Isaiah xl. 3 ; but this positive declaration of Malachi's was well known to Zacharias and to all doctors of the law. And, therefore, it is with this prophecy of the last prophet, that the annunciator at once connects his own declaration, not only for the sake of "clothing it in a familiar and intelligible form of speech," as Olshausen has it, but because for the angel himself, who has for centuries attentively watched God's ways and words with regard to Israel and humanity at large, there attaches now that, after so long a pause, the fulfilment of the prophecy draws near, a deeper solemnity to the last word spoken for four hundred years.

Accordingly, he does not dwell on the still more known, or, at least clearer expression in Mal. iii. 1, but merely glances passingly at it, to combine it with the very last prophetic utterance. And thus he, as the first commentator on the passage, teaches what at that time can hardly have been clear to any, that the messenger or angel preparing the way of the Lord, Himself the Angel of the Covenant, is at the same time the Elias, that is to say, is a type of the latest and proper fulfiller of the prophecy. *And he shall go before HIM.* Here we have a most important testimony borne on the very threshold of the New Testament, by the archangel's lips, to the Godhead of the Saviour about to come in the form of man, for the pronoun expressly relates to the foregoing words—*the Lord their God.*

Again it is before *Him* whom thou hast so anxiously expected, for whose coming thou hast prayed; and we see clearly in ver. 76, 77, how Zacharias on further reflection, and still more by the revelation of the Spirit, understood this going before the face of the Lord. Indeed it was already openly stated in Malachi that the Lord himself was to come to his temple, in the person of the desired Messenger of the Covenant. Before him John is to go, as (we use St. Augustine's words) "the voice before the Word, the light before the Sun, the herald before the Judge, the servant before the Lord, the friend before the Bridegroom." This going before implies preparation. *In the spirit and power of Elias*, the great reformer, great recaller of Israel to God; thus Gabriel solves the question put by the disciples to Jesus after the Transfiguration (Matt. xvii. 10) in the same way that it was then answered by our Lord. The actual Elias, the prophet literally spoken of in Malachi, will doubtless come in his time, before the second advent; meanwhile he is already typically come in

John, to whom was granted the same spirit of power in his own days formerly exercised by the Tishbite in his.

The passage that follows—"to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children"—taken word for word from one clause of the prophetic text, and supplemented by a new explanatory sentence, is at first sight rather more ambiguous, and consequently often misunderstood. For instance, Meyer's note is plainly inadequate, giving as the direct meaning, "the old shall be converted to childish innocence (Matt. xviii. 3), and to faith in the New Covenant, the childishly frivolous and perverse to the wisdom of age." Again we find it rendered in Berlenburg's Bible: "The children shall consider their parents, and the parents their children, and both shall feel that they must be mutually converted." This only amounts to saying that John was to bring both old and young to repentance, to make ready the righteous and unrighteous, men of every stamp, in short, for the Lord.

One of our latest commentators, Van Oosterzee, gives the passage a more special meaning: "Owing to the moral degradation of the people, the sense of filial duty had grown cold in many hearts; when the Forerunner should lift up his voice, the ties of family love would be drawn closer." If this were so, we might expect to find the turning of the heart of the children to their fathers mentioned, as it is in Malachi, and, accordingly, another commentator suggests, on the other hand: "The love of parents to children which in this corrupt time was nearly extinct, as we see in the case of Herod, would be re-awakened by the Baptist, and thus family peace restored would form a foundation for the fear of God." But what reason have we for believing that the solitary of the desert had special reference in his preaching to family affection



and domestic ties? On the contrary, he seems to address those who come to him in a strictly individual manner, each one for himself. We do not see any congruity in such a theory, but the chief objection is this: such is not the meaning of the prophetic text in the Old Testament,—the neglect of which has led the latest commentators astray here as elsewhere.

What, then, do we read in the prophet? We must keep this in view, for the fundamental idea must be the same in both passages.

It is true that the Septuagint does afford a ground for this recent interpretation, but this is by an evident departure from the Hebrew text and context. A mere restoration of family ties, a reconciliation brought about between fathers and children cannot possibly be the meaning of the profound far-reaching prophecy (one only to be entirely fulfilled at the second advent) with which the Old Testament concludes; such a meaning were far too special, too weak and insignificant altogether. Although it is strikingly put, that the children and the parents must be turned to each other, yet the turning of them both to the Lord their God (as Gabriel had previously said) must be the principal thing implied in this. The solution of the difficulty is to be found in a passage of Scripture, to which the prophet Malachi undoubtedly refers, when he foretells the return of Elijah, in whose history that passage occurs. That prophet prayed on Carmel, as we read in the literal translation of 1 Kings xviii. 37, "Hear me, O Lord, that this people may know that thou, Lord, art God, and that thou turnest their heart back again." Here we have the original passage, agreeably to which the expression of Malachi is to be understood. Malachi has previously spoken of the fathers in the sense of *forefathers* (iii. 7 and

ii. 10), and evidently this is his meaning still. Thus the leading idea, the one fundamental sense, which some have erroneously introduced as a mere adjunct, is really this: "The unbelieving descendants are to be turned back to the Messianic faith of their *forefathers*, so that the latter may be at one with them." We have seen that the emphasis is primarily laid upon the heart or the sympathies of the pious fathers being brought back to their descendants, and this is because the heart of the children has already been turned to that of the fathers. Thus the ancient and modern spirit of the children of Israel will once more be reconciled and reunited, because the believing fathers will again acknowledge and incline to the once apostate but now restored children. This had been formerly tolerably well expressed by Jahn: "The Baptist was to make the last attempt to bring about a resemblance between the Jews and their ancestors," or, in other words, as a reformer in the original meaning of the word, he was to restore and re-establish a people of Israel.

Thus Gabriel begins in the words of Malachi, but he goes on to make a new and explanatory addition to the passage. With the *believing* fathers, whom the prophet had in view, the angel contrasts the *unbelieving*,<sup>1</sup> namely, their children, their descendants of the present day; and because unbelief is essentially folly, they are, he declares, to be converted, turned, brought back to the *wisdom of the just*.

And here we may observe that the word *just* is used as a comprehensive term for such as are justified by faith. He only is wise who seeks and finds righteousness through faith; such wisdom is in itself righteousness, while the unbelieving are at the same time the disobedient, the rebellious,

<sup>1</sup> In our English version the word is *disobedient*.

this being also included in the Greek word. That Zacharias perfectly understood this is proved by his eloquent song of praise, the conclusion of which resembles that of the angel's first announcement. Knowledge of salvation (the true wisdom) receives, in the first place, forgiveness of sins from God's mercy, then guides the feet into the way of peace. Both together constitute righteousness. Had Israel been willing to receive and acknowledge that this was the true salvation, the real deliverance, then had it been indeed a people prepared for the Lord, for the visit of the Day-spring from on high. Then would salvation have soon extended from this elect, this earliest prepared nation, to them that still sat in darkness, and in the shadow of death. This was God's purpose, God's offer to them, it was for this that John came and laboured. And that this was not to happen, formed no part of the glad message the angel had to unfold; it was only necessary that he should carefully guard against saying (as we have already pointed out in commenting on ver. 16) that John was to convert the whole people. Preparation for the Lord, that is his last word. The message has two prominent clauses. The one about to be born to thee, is ordained thus to prepare the people. And *a people* is to be so prepared by him.

It would have been neither human nor natural in Zacharias to forget the first clause of the angelic message, that which most nearly concerned himself in the contemplation of the Messiah's coming. "Thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son!" These glad words must have echoed throughout all that was subsequently said. Accordingly, he puts a question that others had put before him, "Whereby shall I know this?" Even Abraham (Gen. xv. 8) had used these very words. Only we find it written in a former verse

that Abraham believed God. Therefore there must have been a difference between the words as used by the father of the faithful, who considered not his own body then dead, neither the deadness of Sarah's womb (Rom. iv. 19), and by the weakly believing, nay, the unbelieving Zacharias, who goes on expressly to oppose the angel's declaration, with the fact that he is old, and his wife well stricken in years, *i.e.*, past the time of child-bearing. Mary's question, on the contrary, "How shall this be?" implies no unbelief, and requires no sign.

In his answer and second address, the angel first reiterates the assurance, nay, even enhances its value, and then proceeds to inflict the punishment of unbelief by the very sign given.

*"I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to bring thee glad tidings."*—He who introduces himself in this majestic manner, as one standing before God, is a real objective being. We are not to believe with Lange, for instance, in "an ecstatic trance, in which the creative energy of God's mighty grace assumed the form of an angel to both these elect spirits" (Zacharias and Mary), and thus give the name of Gabriel to what had only a subjective reality. Such interpretations as these must be repelled as diametrically opposed to the simple Biblical truth. This actually existing angelic being—servant before the throne, whose name was not only familiar to the priest, but to Mary, and indeed to all Israel,—now proceeds to remind the doubting Zacharias of the prophecy in Daniel, as he had before done of that of Malachi. In the days of Herod (ver. 5), all those who waited for salvation in Israel were under the impression that the time was drawing near. Thus we see Zacharias had no objection to offer when the

coming of the Redeemer was announced to him; it was only the birth of a son in his old age which was a stumbling-block to his faith. But both were intimately connected, as he had before heard; therefore Gabriel, ratifying both at once, simply says, "I, Gabriel, am sent to *speake with thee*; hast thou, then, not heard and understood me? These are the glad tidings I have to bring thee; wilt thou refuse to believe them on account of their very gladness?"

"*And, behold, thou shalt be silent, and not able to speake, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.*"—Silent, not able to speak; this sign, given in answer to Zacharias' desire for one, is highly significant. Many divine revelations, indeed, had previously been found to occasion and leave behind bodily infirmity. But there is this peculiarity here; the sign given is at once the confirmation of faith, and the punishment of unbelief; chiefly, indeed, the latter, for it is expressly declared, "*because thou believest not my word.*" Finally, it was a means ordained by divine wisdom to conceal for a while the revelation given. Of course to Elisabeth the marvellous promise would be imparted without words; but the humbled, miraculously-silenced man would certainly not dare to spread it any further. Thus, he was to be led to deeper meditation in sacred silence before his mouth should break forth in praises to God. "He who does not believe should not speak:" such must have been the admission of his conscience, and it is a symbolic lesson to us all. Some have assumed that only thus could the sacred mystery be kept safe from the profanation of unbelieving brethren; but this is not quite a just remark, because Zacharias could hardly have been unwise enough to disclose it to the *profane* while, again, the news of his sudden dumbness in the

temple was in itself calculated to excite the attention of all. We may rather conclude, that while the nature of this first revelation was wisely and fittingly withheld from the public, yet, at the same time, there was enough generally known to excite attention, and give hints of the truth; for the dumbness must have been patent to all, the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy would soon spread, the name John, given contrary to custom, would occasion surmise, the song of praise that instantly burst from the lips of the father when speech was restored, was uttered in a large assembly of people, and would be further disseminated by them. This opening of the closed lips to spread the glad tidings is involved in the word *until*, which makes the chastisement less. The mighty angel now concludes with a further assurance: "My words, which thou hast not believed, *shall be fulfilled*; yea, all of them; first of all the birth of thy son, and next what has been further spoken; word after word will come to pass *in their season*."

Henceforth, faith must be stronger, more unqualified than heretofore; this, too, is taught by the sign given to the pious priest at the opening of the new dispensation. In this sense, we may say with Hiller: "His dumbness teaches more than all he spoke before." If to Gideon and to others the requiring of a sign was a permitted thing, a stricter rule was now about to begin, agreeably to which even the highly-favoured priest, blameless before God as he was, according to the Old Testament standard, (ver. 6), appears blamable and punishment-worthy compared to her who received Christ with full faith, her of whom alone Elisabeth could exclaim, "Blessed is she that believed!"

## CHAPTER II.

## GABRIEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT TO MARY.

STILL more solemn, more mysterious, is the announcement of the wonder of wonders, by the prince of the angels, to the handmaid of the Lord, whose lowliness He had regarded and chosen. God's ways, in nature and in grace, differ from those of the proud, perverse sons of men, who often begin with much show and noise what in its execution dwindles and falls short. The greatest things begin in silence and obscurity; this is generally God's stamp on his wondrous works. But in the lowliness of Mary there was also the truest dignity. This lily of the valley who, by faith in the divine grace, had attained to the tenderest, purest susceptibility for the greatest miracle of grace; this virgin in soul and spirit, is the culminating blossom of the garden of the old dispensation, fit and worthy that the seed from heaven should, in a manner transcending Nature's laws, mature to wondrous fruit within her pure chalice. The sanctuary of her virgin chamber at Nazareth is holier than the temple at Jerusalem. Gabriel's words here are grander, more mysterious, and, at the same time, fraught with fuller revelation than the Christmas angel's announcement respecting the babe in the manger, or the heavenly host's song of praise over

the fields of Bethlehem. All that artists and painters have imagined and executed to illustrate and adorn, all wings, rays of light, lily-stems, and the rest, do but detract, to our mind, from the beauty of the simple narrative. Such additions desecrate Bible stories by an approximation to legend and fable.

That which Mary herself, perhaps, personally communicated to the Evangelist, or that which she noted down, or caused to be noted down, with an inspired accuracy, that, and nothing more, is open to our reading in Scripture. Not one syllable too much is given, not one superfluous detail to feed our curiosity on this or that matter. Mary remains the mother of the Lord, that is enough; her personality must retreat before that of the Lord himself. We enter this protest against the blasphemy that exalts her into the Queen of Heaven and the virtual Saviour, and reduces her mighty Son upon the throne to a child within her arms. We have no authentic information respecting her outward circumstances, her parents, her career, the age at which she gave birth to the Redeemer, that at which she died, or any other kindred fact. The last mention made of her in Holy Writ is before the day of Pentecost (Acts i. 14).

She was a virgin, betrothed, but not yet taken home by her husband. Thus was it wisely ordained in the counsel of God, so that the at first inconceivable secret being kept, and Jesus passing for a son of Joseph, both child and mother might have a protector, a foster-father. Although the connexion in which the words stand is somewhat ambiguous, yet it seems that it is only Joseph whom St. Luke, in verse 27, states to have been a descendant of David; but that Mary was of the same royal descent, is to be inferred, not only from her being taken with him to Bethlehem, but from the angel's mention of the throne of



*his father David* ; for how could Jesus have called David his father after the flesh, but through his mother ?

No less high angel than Gabriel could be sent to Mary, and for this reason he was the one appointed to visit Zacharias also. Now, we read that he *came in unto* the Virgin, who was probably at that time engaged in lonely devotion, and peculiarly fitted to receive such a visitation. We are not told at what hour of the day it took place. It is said only that he, the angel, came in, *i.e.*, appeared to her in the visible customary form of a man, and at once greeted her : *Hail, thou highly favoured ! The Lord with thee : blessed art thou among women.* Instead of the more general form of salutation used in Israel, *Peace with thee*, which would have been too weak here, we have this new, this loftier greeting, to the *highly favoured*, the letter and spirit of which must both have had reference to the inner, the divinely given character and worth of this chosen vessel, not to her external appearance. The phrase made use of in the old Latin version of the Catholic Church, *full of favour or grace*, appears to us even preferable to our own, as more positively expressing this.

But, indeed, the angel himself proceeds to explain his own salutation, when he says, in ver. 30, "Thou hast found favour with God." Thus Mary is not a dispenser of favour, but a recipient of it, with and for the rest of us ; the type and germ of the Church. In the only other passage of the New Testament in which the word occurs (Eph. i. 6), we find it applied to the whole company of the elect, believing and sanctified—"Through the glory of his grace he hath made us accepted in the beloved," *made us full of favour.* No doubt that the expression in its comprehensiveness includes here, as with regard to Mary, the

being made fair and well-pleasing in the sight of God. Indwelling grace has a gracious semblance, and makes its recipients fair. And such must have been eminently the case with the highly favoured Mary, in the sight of God and angels, adorned from *the hidden man of the heart* (1 Pet. iii. 4).

“*The Lord with thee.*”—The indeterminate form of this simple and ancient salutation (Judg. vi. 12; Ruth ii. 4) needs not the intercalated *is* or *be* with *thee*. It floats, as it were, between a wish and a promise, as is still more clearly proved by the context, *Blessed thou*. These words, taken in connexion with *highly favoured*, have a double significance, and attach a fuller meaning to an expression which had already been used in the Old Testament. No doubt, as the consequence of being *highly favoured* was to be fair and pleasing, so that of being *blessed of God* was the being blessed or praised by men also. But this is only the secondary sense; the real force of the salutation lies in the word *blessed* (see ver. 48). Grace removes sin and guilt, therefore a blessing is now substituted for the primeval curse, which, in its physical aspect, pressed most heavily upon woman. The word *thou*, which designates the blessed Virgin, stands with greater emphasis in the original: Thou, amongst (all) women the most blessed; thou, destined to conceive Him who is to be the new, the full blessing for all. Here again the announcement of the loftiest, the most unparalleled mystery, clothes itself in the familiar language of Holy Writ, in order to be equally intelligible and sacred to this pious Israelitish maiden. Deborah had already sung of Jael, “Blessed among women” (Judg. v. 24). The Judith of the Apocrypha—probably only a type of the Jewish people, as Mary is the representative of the Church—is, in chapter

xiii. 42, blessed of God as high *above* all women on earth. But this last, this apocryphally exaggerated expression is now evidently reprov'd by the more measured expression of Gabriel, which is again repeated through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit from the lips of Elisabeth: "Blessed thou among women." Thus Mary even, to whom alone this appellation could correctly apply, is not the exalted, the praised *over* all women, for all her grace, as well as all her blessing, is the portion of us all—the angel greeting the Church, nay, the whole of humanity, through her—The Lord is with you; ye once more blessed ones! And thus, while the Church, with fullest right and deepest truth, authorizes the appropriation of Mary's song of praise by each individual saint, she, in so doing, condemns and refutes the false honour paid to the holy Virgin Mother.

Lastly, we may observe that the whole of Gabriel's first speech, as Mary evidently understood it, and as we shall accordingly read it, is, by its very form, specially a salutation. The promise and the announcement are indeed latent therein, but they are not actually expressed.

"*And when she saw him.*"—The word *him* is not in the original, and the reading which specifically gives us the verb *to see* is a doubtful one. If we examine more closely into the passage, we shall find it to mean that Mary was not so much troubled at the sudden appearance and lofty aspect of her visitant, as at his *saying*. This trouble of hers is indeed a deep inward one, *through and through* (such the peculiar force of the original); but the thoughtful, reflective Virgin, even in the midst of this trouble, at once observed and weighed the character of the greeting. Her humility at once casts in her mind what manner of salutation this might be. "Whence this to me?"

as Elisabeth afterwards expresses it, in holy emulation of this humility. Alas! how different, how darkened, would have been Mary's trouble, if she could have foreseen the future idolatrous repetition of the holy angel's words, "Hail, Mary!" She cast in her mind, with the natural wonder of a lowly heart, but with no doubt or unbelief: "Why should a heavenly messenger so greet me, a poor maiden? Whence is this? What does it portend?" But she does not *say* this out, which would have been unmaidenly. She does not ask, "Who art thou?" but she waits thoughtfully for the continuation of the speech, whose pause has left her a moment for reflection. It is self-evident to her that she sees and hears an angel. To her Gabriel did not announce his lofty name and office as he had done to the priest; this was not necessary to the lowly maiden, so soon simply receiving, as she did, each word by this messenger as from God himself, and at last concluding with fullest submission and confidence, "*Be it unto me as thou* (servant of the Lord, thou also art) *hast spoken.*"

The angel now resumed, answering her thoughts: "*Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour* (or grace) *with God.*"—This expression, *Fear not*, together with the word *grace*, proves to us that even the holy Virgin belonged to a sinful race. Yes, the irremissible thrill of trouble or terror that passed through the silently praying soul, and for a moment clouded the gracious visage, tells of the hereditary taint of humanity, and accordingly Gabriel's condescending kindness proceeds to remove this terror, and to pour increased light upon her mind. He now names the favoured and blessed one by her name Mary, in order to certify to her that the message was indeed rightly addressed to her. This name Mary, that sounds so

sweetly in our ears, that has been, and ever will be, borne by thousands of women throughout Christendom, nay, that in Catholic countries is even added to the names of men, must have been a customary and favourite appellation among the Jews, since in the New Testament alone we find six or seven who were so called; and it was in all probability derived from the name of the eloquent prophetess, the sister of Moses and Aaron. In its original form, the word Miriam<sup>1</sup> spoke strikingly of the bitterness and the affliction of Egypt, perhaps even of rebellion and apostasy. Singular that this name should be so transformed and glorified! Mary has *found favour with God*. This is a very common expression applied to sinful men, from the days of Noah downwards (Gen. vi. 8; compare Gen. xviii. 3, and xix. 19; Exod. xxxiii. 12; Judges vi. 17; 2 Sam. xv. 25), that is to say, it is very often invoked in prayer; but as a greeting to man from on high, it is nowhere to be found in the whole Old Testament, and thus it has, when here applied to Mary, a quite special sense. It does not convey, "Thou hast found, as the result of thy *seeking*;" but, according to the meaning of the Hebrew word *to find*, "Thou hast received, obtained freely."

Up to this moment all has been vague, preparatory, awaking intense expectation and suspense. Now, for the first time, prefaced by the familiar *Behold*, the actual promise appears, and at once refers Mary to the Virgin's son of prophecy, "*And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bear a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.*"

There can be no doubt that Mary, the chosen instructress of the most holy Child, the Jewish maiden learned in the Scriptures, the pious Virgin waiting with special longing for the coming of Messiah, the daughter of David's

<sup>1</sup> Besides the sister of Moses, the name is only found in: 1 Chron. iv. 17.

house, the relation of a priestly family (ver. 36), was intimately acquainted with the leading prophecy in Isaiah vii. 14, of which the angel reminds her, by framing his speech on the very same plan. To conceive, to bear, to call his name—the sequence is in both passages the same; the revelation must have come with power. Thou, Mary, art this virgin; thou shalt conceive *in thy womb*. This addition only gives the Greek rendering of the more simple Hebrew expression (see Gen. xvi. 11; Judges xiii. 3). We may not, as many have done, dogmatically deduce hence the otherwise certain truth that Jesus actually took flesh and blood from Mary, and was born of her. More importance is to be attached to the divinely prescribed name, Jesus, here substituted for the prophetic Immanuel, which even Hebrew scholars have strangely chosen to interpret, *God is help*, or *God's help*, *God's salvation*, although this is grammatically incorrect. The kindred form of *Joshua* (the name given to two typical men, the leader into Canaan, and the high-priest, Ezra ii. 2; Zech. iii. 8), in no way includes the divine name by its literal construction, but simply signifies a promise, He will deliver, will help, *i.e.*, Helper or Deliverer, as the angel expounds it to Joseph (Matt. i. 21). It would be unbecoming that he who is himself *God with us*, or the redeeming God in human nature, in the flesh, should bear, as a "name above every name," one which only promised and confirmed to his forerunner the help of God. Rather was the name thus constructed beforehand, out of the material of lowly types, that it might now, for the first time, become a truth in the fullest sense. The naming of *this* child could not possibly be trusted to a human decision; a literal prophecy was equally unsuitable; the concealment of the mystery by an already

customary name was essential. All these requirements were met by the at once common and exalted name which the angel appoints.

“*He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.*”—Here are evident references to the prophecies concerning Messiah’s person and reign, especially to those in 2 Sam. vii. 12-16; Ps. lxxxix. 27-30; Isaiah ix. 7; Dan. vii. 14. In all these, as here, the *Son of the Highest* is alluded to, of which we shall say more when we come to the angel’s explanation, ver. 35. *He shall be called*; this is equivalent to *he shall be*, as verse 35 sets forth, *rightly called*, and, at the same time, contains the sure promise that he shall be recognised as such, shall receive the glory and honour due to his name. With respect to John, it was said, *great before the Lord*; here the simple but absolute words rise higher, *He shall be great!* True, if in connexion with them we think only of his earthly career from birth to death, we may well say: “That was a singular greatness, which began in a manger and ended on a cross, and, in the interval, was filled with pain, humiliation, and weariness.” Yet, not only was this humiliation more than outweighed by his resurrection and ascension, but this Jesus is truly *great* already; incomparably great even in his humility, his obedience, his patience. We feel this with regard to faint human types; we call him a great man who is capable of self-abnegation, and deep humility; we honour the monarch willing to enter a beggar’s cottage, rather than the despot who proudly looks down on all from his throne. Jesus is never greater than in his immeasurable and unparalleled humiliation for our

sakes, and while, with the eye of faith, we contemplate the infant still in Mary's womb as the eternal Son of God, we are forced even then to exclaim, He is great; greater than all the great ones of earth! Again, we call him great who, for the sake of some high aim, is willing to give up and subdue even his own lawful will, rather than the hero or the tyrant who bends and compels millions by his arbitrary sway. And once more, the man Jesus is great in his unexampled and perfect obedience. Who worthier than he to rule and to be worshipped from childhood upwards? and yet he quietly obeyed and ministered both as child, youth, man, up to his baptism at the hands of John, up to his suffering upon the cross. He was obedient even unto death, and in his patience showed himself greater and greater to the end. He who can suffer is greater than he who rules. Even among men, he who can only command and refuses to obey, can only enjoy and is incapable of enduring, is acknowledged the least and meanest of human beings. Thus Jesus is great, and a Son of the Highest even in his sufferings! Nay, it is these that reveal to us the secret of his special greatness, *Love*; the love which led him to humble himself, to obey, to endure. Love is the greatest attribute of God himself. Yes, this is the godlike greatness of the humanity of Jesus, far transcending the greatness of the consecrated forerunner John, and, therefore, as the angel goes on to say, God gives *him the throne of his father David*.

Gabriel's message naturally relates only to the humanity of the promised Son, dwells only on this; though the substitution of the name Jesus for Immanuel gives a hint of the as yet veiled Divinity, and there is evident design in the omission of the word *his*: "The Lord God," not the Lord *his* God, "shall give him the throne of his father



David." Yet it was impossible that Mary should at the first understand this occult meaning, as it has been very happily observed: "It is worthy of remark, that the divinity of her son was not definitely announced to Mary, otherwise she, as well as Joseph, would have been unable to educate the child." That which was signified to Zacharias in verses 16, 17, is here left completely unspoken. And although the Holy Ghost put the truth into the priest's mouth, ver. 76, 77, to Mary at least it must have remained unintelligible. Again, though we now recognise the greatness in the very humiliation, and Mary, too, must have fully understood this at a later period, yet the angel being commissioned to carry glad tidings says nothing explicit about the cross and the shame. Nor yet does he foretell the reign over the heathen, though in the phrase, "the house of Jacob," the strange nations are virtually included (Isaiah xiv. 1; xlv. 5). But as it was, Mary's faith in the promise must often have been severely tried; and when at last she stood on Golgotha,—the sword piercing her soul, and her dying son, mocked with the title of King as he hung on the accursed tree, with his last breath gave her into the charge of his favoured disciple—oh, where, she might have asked, was then the throne of David his father, and the rule over the house of Jacob for ever? And yet, even at that moment, all was fulfilled, and the King had, with almighty triumph, won the kingdom to which he was hereafter to welcome all who called upon him, and the throne of glory at the right hand of Power! But the beginning of the angel's speech is fraught with a still more glorious truth; He *shall* be great, yea, great till the end of time, and to all eternity. Unlike all earthly kingdoms in their decline and fall, *His* kingdom is to have no end! This is evidently quoted from Dan. vii. 14, and serves at the

beginning of the New Testament not only to confirm all the promise in the Old regarding the kingdom of Israel, but to perpetuate this last kingdom eternally. This *everlasting kingdom* gives an intense significance to the name, "Son of the Highest." That an everlasting kingdom should be infinite in extent (see Dan. ii. 44) is self-evident, is therefore left unexpressed. And here we are taught that while the office of prophet and priest comes to an end, that of King remains, so that the passage in 1 Cor. xv. 24-28 is not to be explained as contradicting the eternal reign of the Son.

Mary rightly comprehended that that which was announced to her was immediately to come to pass, namely, the conceiving of the son she was to bear. And either because the appointed time for her being taken home by Joseph was not sufficiently near, or that after the words spoken, "Son of the Highest," she was unable to think of Joseph as the destined father, she asks plainly and freely, out of the inmost depths of her pure consciousness, How shall this be, seeing that I know not a man? This is not the language of unbelief, but of the most chaste maidenhood, which, at once bashful and submissive, could find no other expression. The angel, who was fully prepared for this most natural question, now goes on to reply to it. "*The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing, which shall be born of thee, shall be called the Son of God.*"

"*That holy thing, born of thee,*" *i.e.*, that shall be born of thee, implies the immediate nature of the promise; compare Matt. i. 20; the expression "*of thee,*" or literally, "*out of thee,*" we hold, upon the valid ground of ancient authority, both as a genuine and conclusive proof that the

humanity of Jesus was derived from that of Mary. Her offspring is spoken of in the neuter (Matt. i. 20), *that which is conceived, that holy thing*; partly because of its then undeveloped state, and partly because this thing *conceived and born* is really, according to our interpretation, the *righteousness* spoken of in Dan. ix. 24. It was not because he was born of a perfect, immaculately-conceived mother, that the child was holy, but because he was conceived by the Holy Ghost. Mary herself, indeed, was first sanctified by Christ. So far we agree with Bengel; but when he, with many old authorities, proceeds to construe, *the thing born . . . shall be holy, and called the Son of God*, we protest, out of mere love of grammatical accuracy. The originally pure human person born of Mary is obviously the subject of the predicate "Son of God." For this much is clearly intelligible, though often overlooked or vaguely apprehended; here it is the *humanity* of Jesus which is to be, and to be called the Son of God; not only *thy* son—that, the angel now throws into the background, being already established by the words, "thou shalt conceive, born of thee,"—but God's Son, through a new creative beginning, even as Adam was (chap. iii. 38). Neither in the "*theocratic*" sense which man has invented, nor yet in the so-called metaphysical, which could only be unfolded at a later period, but in a *physical* sense does Gabriel now say, Son of God, Son of the Highest. And having had reference throughout his second address to this miraculous birth, he now goes on to give a positive assurance of the possibility and certainty of the wondrous event, to the announcement of which his commission was limited.

"*And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month*

*with her, who was called barren.*"—That which was incredible to Zacharias, and yet is now in process of fulfilment, was for Mary a confirmation of a still more incredible event. With considerate precision the angel specifies the sixth month, after which time pregnancy is no longer uncertain, but becomes obvious (ver. 24). The Virgin, indeed, asks for no sign, she has met the announcement in faith; but for the strengthening and preserving of this faith, and in order that she might remain during the whole time of her pregnancy free from all weakness and perfectly sanctified, such a sign, such a kindred miracle as she could rest upon, was, we may believe, essential. It is true, nevertheless, that her relationship with Elisabeth was by marriage only, not one of blood; for that Mary was descended from the tribe of Levi (as from ver. 5 we know Elisabeth to have been), and thus that the descent of the Lord Jesus from the tribe of Judah (Heb. vii. 14) and the house of David should be merely nominal, hingeing upon his supposed relationship to Joseph, is a very foolish opinion of a few old writers. But it is remarkable that the two women should have been referred to each other, by a hint that, judging from vers. 39, 40, Mary at once obediently acted upon. All the rest, the ordaining and the appointing of the Forerunner of her son, she was to learn from Elisabeth.

But because even the pregnancy in old age of one hitherto barren could not parallel the wonder of a maiden's maternity, Gabriel before he closes his reply to Mary's question adds the strong confirmation which the most universally admitted of truths lend to this incomparable mystery, *For with God no word shall be impossible.* Certainly we may render the passage with equal grammatical propriety "no *thing*," only Mary uses the former expression

in her reply: "Be it unto me according to thy *word*," so that the real meaning seems to be—No word of divine promise, statement, or announcement, is impossible. All that God *says* and *wills* he can also perform. These words of the angels sound in Greek like those words of the Lord to Sarah (Gen. xviii. 14), and of these they must finally have reminded Mary. And now, such the child-like faith in which she has been nurtured and lives, in the Almighty God, and in all the wonders of his might, from ancient times till now; Mary has nothing more to ask! O that we might resemble her in this, and learn experimentally to understand what Hamann says, "Philosophical curiosity is silenced by the most everyday commonplace!" "How shall this be?" Mary had at first asked. Does she *understand* any better now, in the lower sense of the word understanding, *how* the Holy Ghost is to come upon her, and the power of the Highest to overshadow her? By no means; the mystery only deepens, but her faith is also perfected.

The first woman was taken from man; the new Adam's humanity is to be born of woman; woman in her pure womanhood has conceived, borne, and given birth to this new creature, even as it was enigmatically prophesied in Jeremiah, "The woman shall compass the man."

"Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy *word*."—So speaks the chaste Virgin, not merely silently submissive, but at once *desiring* and expecting. Her timid bashfulness changes into a tender and yet fervent longing which speaks, exclaims, prays: Be it unto me as my Lord speaks and wills! And that very moment it is done. "The moment that Mary gave her assent was that in which she began to be great with the Holy Child," writes Luther; and such has been the opinion of many early writers since Irenæus. As Dean

Alford very truly observes, "Mary was no unconscious vessel chosen by the Divine will, but (compare ver. 45) in faith and humility a fellow-worker with God." But we know not where Lange finds reason for supposing, contrary to all probability, that this expression of hers implied a voluntary submission to the disgrace and humiliation she foresaw as the consequence of her altered condition; we, for our parts, believe that such a thought was far from Mary's mind at the time, and could only have been felt to be disturbing and incongruous had it occurred. The last fact that we read of satisfies us completely as to the character of the whole transaction being simple, encouraging, and free from any shadow cast by conflicting feelings. The angel departed from her as he had entered in. This was very different to his sudden appearing to and vanishing from Zacharias. Mary was left glad and blessed, as her song of praise soon tells us. What afterwards followed with regard to Joseph brought indeed the first sorrow, the first distress, but doubtless failed to disturb or weaken the light and strength of faith in the depths of the Virgin's soul.

## CHAPTER III.

## APPEARANCE OF THE ANGEL IN A DREAM TO JOSEPH.

## MATTHEW I.

*The birth of Jesus Christ was (or came to pass) thus.*—Grand simplicity of the brief authentic narrative, written evidently without the least idea that its historical truth could ever come to be doubted. What a *thus* this is! Contrary to all human, all Jewish expectation, yet exactly according with the whole of prophecy, even fulfilling its very letter respecting the Virgin more completely than could have been comprehended beforehand. Matthew confines himself to this one main point; that is enough for the beginning of his Gospel. He tells us nothing more of the persons or their circumstances. Mary is the mother, Joseph her betrothed husband; we only hear of Bethlehem and Nazareth in the next chapter, and they are briefly mentioned. Much that seems essential to our understanding the difficulties that divided the betrothed pair before the angel smoothed them away (especially when we take the narrative of St. Luke in connexion with that of St. Matthew), is left by this last evangelist to be filled up by our own reflection and surmise, teaching us thereby that the true value of his testimony to the faith by no means lies in minute historical details.

There can be no doubt that believers—we speak not of

profane misunderstandings—have explained to themselves the progress of these events in very different ways. We now proceed to give our own view, and our reasons for it. We cannot possibly assume, as some have done, that all that is here related by St. Matthew, up to the taking of his wife by Joseph, happened before Mary's visit to Elisabeth. For St. Luke's expression (i. 39) is certainly to be understood as implying a short interval between the arising of Mary and going into the hill-country, and the hint that the angel had given her in the 36th verse (of course allowing time for preparation for a long journey).<sup>1</sup> The question that offers so much difficulty, and has been so contradictorily solved, is this: Did Mary impart the angel's annunciation to Joseph or not? We refer to the text for an answer. When we see St. Matthew writing (ver. 18) *she was found with child*, and connect with the expression all Joseph's plans and perplexity, we cannot withhold our conviction that Mary had not spoken at all on the subject with him. Still less had she done so before her journey to the city of Zacharias. Not only may we say with Olshausen, "The narrative of Matthew leaves the impression that Mary had not disclosed her state to Joseph;" but this inference follows unavoidably from the text.

No one speaking of a fact communicated by the very person most intimately concerned therein would have used the expression, "*she was found* (was discovered to be) with child." We may even say further, Mary could not, dared not have spoken of herself except in the tone of her song of praise, and for this very reason we may conclude that she had not as yet done so to Joseph. It was a mystery too marvellously tender, high, deep to touch

<sup>1</sup> The Jewish custom precluding an unmarried woman from travelling had probably fallen at this time into desuetude.



upon! No doubt the betrothed had often met, often conversed in Nazareth, before Joseph took his wife unto him, but Mary kept silence, and this we find most natural. Our conviction differs from that of the commentators who believe her to have imparted the fact to Joseph, and he to have incredulously rejected her account of it. We hold rather that Joseph *would* have believed, would not have been able to resist the evident stamp of truth upon the words that fell from his Mary's lips. Would she not, as the Evangelist does us, have referred Joseph to the Virgin foretold in Isaiah? Would she not have so spoken and reasoned as to leave without a shadow of doubt the pious bridegroom who so thoroughly knew her character? But, on the other hand, we believe that Mary did not *choose* to do this, not only because she left everything to the Lord, but because she could not feel perfectly certain that Joseph would believe her statement, dared not therefore mention it to him. Thus our view takes a middle course between two extremes. We hold that in all probability, not only from his knowledge of what Mary was, but from the self-evident truth of her statement, Joseph would have been convinced. He would not have been likely to suppose her an "enthusiast" or "deluded;" that was not the tone of thinking in those days. And as to her being a deceiver, seeking to conceal her sin against himself, under cover of an angel's promise of the highest deliverer Israel had to expect,—nay, he never could have believed her at once so impious and so foolish! His plans (ver. 19) by no means imply a previous communication from her. Thus much seems almost indubitable: Joseph would have believed, but Mary did not speak; and this was most fitting and congruous. Mary's delicate, correct feeling, confidently expected and implored that the discovery might be made to him from above.

“*Before they came together.*”—This expression of the Evangelist means: Before he took her home. And as this taking home usually implied the consummation of the marriage (Deut. xx. 7), we have the positive assurance of the 25th verse. But a pregnancy of three months (Luke i. 56) must soon have betrayed itself after Mary’s return, must have gradually become more and more apparent; and then the long journey, the reason for it being unexplained; the long visit, and it is thus she returns! And she says nothing about it to me! Joseph must have been more than Joseph, must have been even more than Mary herself, if, without the aid of revelation, he could have discovered the only solution to his painful doubts: “*that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.*” For as to speaking on the subject to her, openly questioning her, he could not find it in his heart to do that.

What, then, was to be done? As far as lay in his power he decided upon the best and most righteous course. He was a *just* man. He was free from the spirit of jealousy which the law tacitly condemns, even while legislating for it (Numb. v. 14). His justice is of the genuine kind; it is even because he is just, that he will not be harsh and severe to the woman he has loved, and whose whole previous conduct and character, yea even whose present demeanour, perplexing though it be, seem to contradict the appearances against her. At first sight Matthew appears to give the justice of Joseph as a reason for his sparing Mary, but this was not its only consequence; it was the same conscientious spirit that led him to fear, to shrink from taking her to himself, as the angel goes on to say. Accordingly he hits upon the one just middle course, and certainly no blame could attach to him.

“*Because he was a just man, and not willing to make*

*her a public example, he was minded to put her away privily.*”—According to the law of Moses, betrothal counted as marriage, as Deut. xxii. 23, 24, sufficiently proves, the betrothed damsel being called the “neighbour’s wife.” Thus a letter of divorcement was necessary to the putting away; nay, if once the case were publicly brought forward, the adulteress would be liable to the punishment of stoning to death, though we may infer from John viii. that it was no longer rigidly enforced. But Joseph means to put away Mary privily, quietly, merely by means of a letter of divorcement, properly witnessed by two, without assigning any cause for such a step, preferring, with touching affection and self-denial, that the blame of inconstancy and unkindness should attach to himself; for it would be left uncertain whether the child were not really his, and yet the mother rejected by him. Except that, indeed, as has been sensibly observed, reflective people might well surmise “that so right-minded and kind-hearted a man must have been moved by some strong reason to take such a step.”

So much indeed is true: “Jesus bore the shame that attaches to all illegitimate children while in his mother’s womb, and Mary must have had her portion in that shame.” But as to what is usually said of the trial to faith, the distress and sorrow of Mary, is for the most part erroneous. It is not in keeping with her character, nor would it, during these months of pregnancy, have been desirable or fitting with reference to the holy child. No, Mary patiently waited and prayed, unshaken in her comfortable conviction that God himself would solve all difficulties. Nor was this her faith confounded. Even while Joseph was thinking on these things, the divine dream came to remove his perplexity. We learn from this expression of the Evangelist, that Joseph had not

spoken of his intentions to Mary, but only matured them in his own mind. The case has been well put thus: "Mary said nothing, and accordingly Joseph said nothing either, though he had fully made up his mind what to say." But when the commentator goes on to find fault with this silence of Joseph, and to call upon us to distinguish "the difference between the pure, childlike spirit of the Virgin, whose womb God had chosen for the dwelling of his Son, and the righteousness and justice of a man under the law," this is an uncalled-for criticism. Both did right; no pious man in Israel could have behaved more gently and justly than Joseph purposed doing in this unique and complicated case.

We must endeavour still further to realize the whole of its complication, in order thoroughly to understand the angel's words. An angel of the Lord—whether this was Gabriel or not is doubtful—appeared to Joseph in a dream, which was a lower form of revelation, fitted for one who personally was of inferior importance. Olshausen, however, goes too far, when he says of Joseph, "the gospel narrative does not define his character at all;" for surely in ver. 19 we have a very significant sketch of the disposition of the man. To have intercourse with angels in a dream is of itself a high distinction, although it cannot compare with the actual appearance in broad daylight of angelic messengers to chosen souls; and though conveyed to him in a comparatively natural manner, still the message of the angel was something Joseph never could have imagined himself, something quite distinct from those thoughts or dream-visions that occupied his sleeping mind, connected as these were with the decision it was laboriously working out in his waking hours.

*"Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee*

*Mary thy wife : for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.*”—Not only is his name given in full, because this is usual in such messages, but in order that the honourable title “son of David” should recall to him the great promise given to the house of David. *Fear not*, as though thou wert wrong in so doing (compare *Doubt nothing*, Acts x. 20). Joseph’s betrothed is here spoken of to him as already his wife, according to the customary language of the Mosaic law (see Deut. xxii. 24); just as the Evangelist had before called him Mary’s husband (ver. 19); and thus the angel shows that he considers the marriage-tie as still retaining all its original sacredness and rights, and Joseph as authorized to take Mary home in the character of wife (see Gen. xxix. 21). And further, in ver. 24, the Evangelist positively shows to all who are not bent upon escaping from the natural inference, that after the birth of Jesus Christ, Joseph became Mary’s husband in reality. Lange treats this matter very arbitrarily. He maintains that the question, whether Mary and Joseph lived together as man and wife (which he himself cannot avoid owning to be affirmed by the text), and the question whether Mary had other children, are distinct, and to be kept so. But we maintain both that Joseph did really consummate the marriage, and that it did not remain unblessed, for we find later a casual mention made of brothers and sisters, together with the mother of Jesus, and the words are to be simply understood in their primary meaning. Many, indeed, deny this, who yet feel themselves obliged to give up the perpetual virginity of Mary, but we see no manner of reason for their doing so.

“*That which is conceived in her.*”—Compare Luke i. 35. “*that which is born of thee.*” The message goes on to specify more distinctly that this is a son; *is of the Holy Ghost*

the same enigma as for Mary. If Joseph had any disposition left to inquire *how* this could be, he would receive from Mary the only possible answer : God said it, and it has come to pass. But he *believed* at once, and took comfort from the angel's saying, as was proved by his ready obedience, ver. 24. Truly this obedience also deserves to be called great.

“*She shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus ; for he shall save his people from their sins.*”

—At first we have almost the identical words used to Mary, from whence, however, we need not conclude, what is otherwise improbable, that Gabriel was the angel speaking. Not she shall *bear thee* (as in Luke i. 13), as most commentators have almost unnecessarily pointed out. In Isaiah vii. 14, we find, according to the best translation, *she* shall call his name Immanuel, in order to bring into full prominence the Virgin as only parent of the child. On the other hand, we see in Luke i. 62, as well as in Gen. xxi. 3, that, generally speaking, the right of naming the child belonged to the father. Thus the angel, by not only conceding to Joseph the right publicly to bestow this divinely-appointed name on the child, but enjoining on him the doing so as a duty, shows that this son of David was, as husband to Mary, to stand in the legal position of father to the child, to adopt him before the world, and to accept the charge of bringing him up.

The interpretation of the name that follows is strikingly more full and clear than that given in the annunciation to Mary ; speaks out more plainly that this Saviour is to accomplish a spiritual, a real deliverance ; more absolutely does away with all political expectation than even the inspired song of Zacharias. We would recall what we have already said respecting the almost universal error as to the etymology of the name of Jesus, because here we

have fuller light shed upon the subject. The angel, in interpreting this name, does not say, God's or the Lord's salvation will come through him, God will save through him, but merely and emphatically, He *himself*, who bears this name, will save, will bless; He himself will be in his own person what he is called, and so this ancient name, borne by so many, will, for the first time, be thoroughly fulfilled in him. The same meaning is to be found in Luke ii. 11, and is repeated in the Acts of the Apostles, iv. 12.

But what is this full deliverance, this perfect help, this salvation without which all else so called is unavailing at last? "*Sins*," the many that have sprung from the first original sin, these are our enemies. Not only is punishment here meant, but, most especially, our *sins* themselves, which he is come into the world to take away (1 John iii. 5). He does not save us *with*, but *from* our sins. This cannot be sufficiently preached.

That this child already conceived, this Jesus or Saviour, to be born, should save *all* men, *all* sinners, the angel does not indeed say; the mystery of the salvation of all nations (Eph. iii. 5) is not yet to be clearly revealed, the first *bright* ray of this new light is to proceed from the prophet Simeon. But, at least, he designedly avoids the word *Israel*, giving, in its stead, his *people*, which expression will come to include all men under heaven (Acts iv. 12). *His* people; this emphatically confers the same position formerly expressed by the appellation, "God's people." We may affirm that *all* sinners who desire to be free from their sins, and to submit themselves to Jesus in faith, have by this very desire become his people, and *all* his people he saves from their sins. This glad prophetic import of his most holy name, Jesus has fulfilled ever

since, and will go on fulfilling even more and more, so that the words of the prophet are peculiarly applicable here: "There is none like unto thee, O Lord; thou art great, and thy name is great in might (Jer. x. 6).

The verses 22, 23, are not a continuation of the angel's speech, as might at first sight be supposed, but the evangelist's own quotation of a fulfilled prophecy, as the expression, "All this was done," unmistakably proves. The closing paragraph tells of Joseph's immediate obedience to, and full faith in, the command he had received in sleep, and authorizes us to imagine the joy with which the betrothed pair would exchange the recital of the special revelations made to them. Matthew concludes his first chapter with the impressively repeated name *Jesus*, sets it as a seal to the close of this his first narrative; the second closing with the once despised, now honoured affix, of *Nazareth*.



## CHAPTER IV.

THE ANGELS THAT ANNOUNCE THE BIRTH OF CHRIST  
AT BETHLEHEM.

LUKE II.

IN treating of the familiar but inexhaustible Christmas text contained in this chapter, we have no intention of preaching a sermon; we only wish to present the radiant words in their simple profundity and natural sequence to the Christian reader, and with exegetical precision to place in its true light whatever has been imperfectly understood and preached, or erroneously translated.

“*There were in the same country shepherds,*”—signifies the environs, or a district near to Bethlehem; shepherds dwelling with their flocks in the plains or open country. Their number is not given to us any more than that of the wise men of the East, with reference to whom tradition will not be satisfied to receive the simple Bible narrative. These shepherds, humble, if not poor, were more favoured than all the great and wise in Israel, nay, than all men then upon the earth. Not to the high-priest and doctors of the law, not even to Mary and Joseph, does the glory of the heavenly pageant appear.

This much we may assert of these shepherds, they were evidently pious men, waiting intelligently and anxiously for the redemption of Israel. On this subject Schleiermacher has justly and beautifully observed, as Neander

acknowledges : " This satisfaction of individual desire, not infrequent at great eras such as this, is truly impressive and divine." A thought that is still more admirably elaborated by Van Oosterzee : " In this satisfaction of the private and concealed desire of a few individuals at the very moment that the eternal salvation of millions was being provided for, there is something indescribably touching and divine. We overlook the masses in the individual, or the individual in the masses ; God regards both at once, and both alike." Indeed it is generally the manner of all divine manifestations as unfolded to us from earliest times, to make known to a few elect persons, in the first instance, what is intended for all ; so that the facts that are to become most universally known have a silent and unnoticeable origin. " The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him, and he shall show them his covenant" (Ps. xxv. 14), and according to this ancient rule the first recipients of the new announcement here stand in the place of or represent the whole people of the Lord.

In the neighbourhood of Bethlehem there was in olden times a fortified place for flocks, a *tower* of shepherds, as already appears in Gen. xxxv. 21. This is spoken of by the prophet Micah, the proper rendering of chap. iv. 8 being : " And thou, *tower of the flock*, thou strong hold (hill) of the daughter of Zion, unto thee shall it come, even the former dominion, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem." Now, this hill of the daughter of Zion, *i. e.*, the tower of Ophel at Jerusalem,<sup>1</sup> may represent the house of David, and be at the same time named a tower of the flock in remembrance of David's original character of shepherd of the sheep, and afterwards shepherd of Israel. In either case, since the prophecy concerning Bethlehem comes from

<sup>1</sup> 2 Chron. xxvii. 3 ; xxviii. 14 ; Neh. iii. 26 ; xi. 21 ; Isa. xxxii. 14 (Heb.)

Micah, our thoughts revert not only to the tower of the flocks that stood there, but discern in the passage an allusion to the future announcement of the coming kingdom to the *shepherds* near Bethlehem. These shepherds, not incorrectly viewed as types of the shepherds of God's flock, were found faithful to their calling even in the hours usually devoted to rest; they were keeping watch over their sheep by night. Then there came to them, or rather suddenly stood before them ("not having been seen either to walk or fly") an angel of the Lord. Whether this was again Gabriel we are not told, and do not therefore venture to decide, though it seems most probable, from chap. i. 19-26, that this angel, not being named here, was not the same as on the two former occasions. But it was a real individual angel, and no doubt one exalted above others, as he was chosen for the honour of bringing such a message. We know not why Lange, in opposition to the literal truth of the narrative, should persist in speaking of the shepherds having "a vision of the angel of the covenant."

The *birth* of the Lord is announced and celebrated, we observe, in a manner quite different from that of the Forerunner; the child registered on earth as a subject of the Roman Empire, is proclaimed by the heavenly hosts as the Saviour of all mankind. No glory streams round his manger, but the shepherds are *shone round about* (as in Acts xxvi. 13) at the appearing of the angel with the *glory of the Lord*, the light of God referred to in Ps. civ. 2. Not like to a fire as in Exod. xxiv. 7, but in mild splendour shines this light in the night that tells of the holy birth of the wondrous child. And yet the shepherds were "sore afraid," till the one angel commissioned to speak first of all the heavenly host, addresses them in these gracious words:

“*Fear not ; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to the whole people.*”—Of all the exhortations, “*Fear thou not,*” “*fear ye not,*” which the Holy Scriptures contain for the comfort of the children of men, surely this is the most significant, the most glorious. Even passages like that in Rev. i. 17, have not quite so close, so full a relation to that first “*I was afraid,*” in the mouth of fallen Adam. In the same way the noteworthy prelude, “*behold,*” has an unparalleled strength of emphasis laid upon it here ; for even the last *behold* in Rev. xxi. 3, 5, is included in and develops itself as a consequence of this. The message of the resurrection even, as Bengel observes, does not positively express the joy which it is destined to convey ; but here the child in the manger is from the first designated, as we parents delight to hear our children call him in their Christmas games, a child of *great joy*. Truly the word *joy* is one that must at all times be welcome to the fearful, care-worn, sorrowful heart of humanity. Here, too, it sounds forth as the real fulfilment of the prophetic words (Isa. ix. 3, 6). No doubt the Old Testament often gives us the reassuring *fear not*, but henceforth more than the joy in harvest, more than the joy of dividing the spoil, is conveyed by the *great joy* with which the gospel begins, when, for the first time, it is preached to the poor. *Great* is the joy Christ brings to all those who sorrow for sin ; great in its height, breadth, depth ; so great that to all eternity it will remain unexhausted. Yea, this joy not only removes all grief, but alone makes earthly joy to be joy indeed. The angel, in using the words “*I bring to you,*” refers primarily to the shepherds to whom he speaks, but he immediately adds, that the glad tidings are to be made known by them to the whole people, or, as it is more generally rendered,

to all people. And not incorrectly, since the message, taken as a whole, borders very closely upon the disclosure of the mystery (soon to be revealed by Simeon, ver. 31, 32). "Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people" (Rom. xv. 10). Nay, perhaps, the second clause (ver. 11), *to you is born*, may be understood in the same comprehensive sense as the close of the angelic song of praise—"Peace on earth, good-will to men." But literally the angel's speech begins with Israel, as it was meet; the gracious offers of salvation being in very deed first made to the chosen people. The fact, however, that the Lord's people would subsequently reject the one now born to them, and accordingly come short of the *great joy*, is not at this juncture to cloud and mar the glad tidings brought.

"For there is born to you to-day a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord, in the city of David."—We observe a harmony with the order of the prophetic words, "For unto us a child is born;" and the yet more profoundly significant clause that immediately follows, "unto us a son is *given*" (given to us all as our own). But in our text the word *born* stands out first with a stronger emphasis; the *us* of the prophet changes to the *you*, applied by angel lips to men; the great *to-day* is come which divides the history of the world into two mighty epochs of before and after Christ. To the angel the child born is already *the Lord* whom he worships, as in Matt. xxviii. 6, where the same words, but still more simple, without any affix whatsoever, are spoken by an angel of him who had been laid in the grave. To us the children of men he is born a Saviour, which expression hitherto had sometimes in its lowest sense been, as we have before seen, applied to sundry human helpers, deliverers, redeemers; sometimes in its highest sense had been used as one of the names of God himself, from I Sam.

xiv. 39; 2 Sam. xxii. 3; Isa. xlv. 15; down to Luke i. 47. But here the name of Jesus is pointed at, and to it is added, "which is Christ." Not, however, specially *the* Saviour, but as the English Bible correctly renders it, *a* Saviour, a born child of Adam's race, a person, a man to whom this name belongs, fully, absolutely, as it never did to any other. First we have the fact itself, the cause of the great joy, salvation for the sinner; then the person in whom the salvation is contained: He, who as man is the long-promised, newly-born Christ; as God, is for all angels *the Lord*. This is the only place where both names, *Christ*, —*the Lord*, occur in this exact connexion, which essentially distinguishes them from "the Lord's Christ" in ver. 26. We should be careful therefore in no way to diminish or obscure the lofty meaning of the expression, as they do who explain it, "The great deliverer, the God-consecrated king." Whether the pious shepherds understood the full bearing of the words is another question which has nothing to do with their proper exposition; for these *are* the words which have come down from the first hearers, and have spread over the world. At all events, they must have had more correct ideas concerning the expected Christ than the Samaritan woman had (John iv. 25), and they would probably draw a lofty inference from the expression, *the Lord*.

Lastly, we have the specific information connected with the directions given for the finding of the child (ver. 12), "*in the city of David*." The time of the holy birth, *to-day*, burst forth in the angelic message first, then comes the *place* which, according to prophecy, could indeed be no other. Not only were the chief priests and scribes familiar with those words of the prophet Micah (Matt. ii. 4, 6), but some knowledge of them had even spread

abroad among the people, as we see from John vii. 42. Accordingly we find that the earliest disciples were in no way scandalized by the Messiah being of Nazareth.

It appears most probable from the angel's address that the shepherds were well acquainted with the prophecy. And besides, pious shepherds in Bethlehem had just now peculiar reason to remember the honour and dignity ascribed in Scripture to their little town. No doubt the *taxing* just decreed, reminding persons so vividly of their house and lineage, had given them and others occasion to sigh: Alas, how lowly and obscure are the descendants of David become! O that the son of David would soon come to his kingdom!

And, lo! he is come; he is born in his own city! That the shepherds, as soon as this was made known to them, should at once prepare to go to Bethlehem, to see that which was come to pass, is taken for granted; they are not told to go. But their first impulse would naturally have been to inquire aloud for the new-born king, supposing that his birth was generally known, as did the wise men in Jerusalem. To prevent them from doing this, the angel gives them a sign unasked, not as confirmation of their faith, for these shepherds had simply believed each word that fell from his lips; but to help them in their silent seeking and finding, in which, indeed, it is probable they were still further assisted by a divine leading.

“*And this (shall be) to you the sign; you shall find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, (and) lying in a manger.*” —Here only one sign is specifically given to them, and that is; *in a manger!* The word *and* is in all probability not authentic; the passage runs, a *swaddled child, lying* (as all new-born children indeed do, but not in such comfort as even the poorest have; no, but) *in a manger*

That is the sign, that is the extraordinary circumstance, whereas the swaddling clothes are proverbial, are universal, without respect of persons, as we read in the Book of Wisdom (vii. 3-6). Nevertheless, we are authorized to take not only the swaddling clothes as well, but more especially the *child*, as for us the lovely sign of our Lord and Saviour. A *child*<sup>1</sup> thus is Christ the Lord as our Saviour, to be made like unto us; to take our poor flesh and blood on him, that is his first sign. Akin to this are the swaddling clothes, typical of helplessness and weakness (see, in addition to the passage of Wisdom, Ezek. xvi. 4), and common to all; but the unusual circumstance is the manger, the unclean manger, fitted only for cattle, a sign of poverty and humiliation indeed. But as shepherds were familiar with the stall and the manger, this sign was one peculiarly calculated to encourage them: "You may approach *this* king; he is not come in worldly pomp and splendour." Again, there would certainly be no other child at that time in Bethlehem lying in a manger, they would not therefore make any mistake as to his identity. Some have, indeed, read in *the* manger (but erroneously, see ver. 7), and have thence concluded that the angel referred to one in a stable belonging to these very shepherds, but the tone of the whole narrative, especially of ver. 8, is opposed to such an idea.

We pass onward from the touching picture of the swaddled and manger-laid baby, condescendingly afforded us by the angel, to the lofty hymn which followed upon the lowly details just given. "Heaven alone then knew of the treasure bestowed on earth," as it has been well and truly said. Nay more, all the angels of heaven were powerless to effect what this new-born infant brought and

<sup>1</sup> Not, as generally rendered, "*the* child."



fulfilled ; and for this reason the “ heavenly hosts sing to the child born in Bethlehem such a cradle-song as never was sung to monarch’s son, for in those swaddling clothes is wrapped a mystery into which even angels desire to look.” To which we add, that for men and angels, the *understanding* of this mystery is from first to last limited to *adoration*, “ Glory be to God in the highest !”

And *suddenly*, quite unexpectedly, *there was* (there became visible with the angel who had just spoken) *a* (great, or, it may be rendered, *the whole*) *multitude* of the heavenly host. If over the repentance of one sinner there is joy among the angels of God, joy throughout heaven, how should not *all* the angels have rejoiced with and over us in this *great joy*? Certainly we do not find it so specified in the original, but it is hardly to be conceived that the whole multitude of the angels was not present ; how should any of them have failed, as though unconcerned in this great event? If at the first creation of the earth the morning stars sang praise, and all the sons of God shouted for joy, how much more now?

“ *Glory* (be now) *in the height to God, and on earth peace, to men* (a) *good will.*”—This is the proper construction of the passage. There is indeed a different reading, authorized by the Catholic Church, which gives us, *to men of good will*, but there are positive and well-founded objections to it. Neither the critical investigation of ancient mss., nor customary idiom, still less the general meaning of the passage, authorizes such a limitation of this full gospel and comprehensive song of praise, such an allusion to the co-operating good-will of men. Luther, indeed, while still fettered by the traditional interpretation, understands the passage, *good-will of men, i.e., their praise and thanksgiving to God, and their entire*

resignation of themselves to his will. But *we*, for our parts, unbiassed by human authority however high, determine with the angel only to give glory to God, and to proclaim and celebrate *his* good-will to man, and that only.

From the nature of the three clauses, we may infer that two choruses answered each other, alternately speaking of heaven and earth, then joined in one common song to express the ground of the union of heaven with earth, of God with men. The very words, indeed, are rightly called, not so much a song, as an ascription of *praise to God*, as the Evangelist says in ver. 13, for the first clause is the main one, which the others only confirm and complete. The best and clearest illustration of its meaning as a whole is given by Nitzsch, when he says: "This song rises up to the glory of God, comes down again to proffer peace to earth, rests with good-will on men;" and proceeds to paraphrase its contents: "How is the glory of God manifested in the making earth peaceful, by mercy and good-will shown to sinful man;" to which we may add Beck's beautiful thought, "The angels' song soars to heaven, then stoops to earth, and concludes with men, as though it would for ever echo in the human heart."

Further, we may remark that the threefold division, as is almost always the case, assumes a Trinitarian form: Glory to the Father, peace through the Spirit, God's good-will manifested by his Incarnate Son; with which may be compared the similar sequence in Tit. iii. 4-6.

Well might we be content to sing after the example of the angels, "Glory *be* to God in the highest," but we must not forget that the words imply not merely an aspiration, but, at the same time, an *announcement* of what actually is; *how*, because the Saviour is born, there does, indeed, arise new glory to God. For a prophecy and assurance

that this glory will be given to him more and more, is contained in the fact itself. God's glory, the foundation and aim of all things—what is it else than (according to the closely resembling Greek and Hebrew words) the image of the divine glory in the creature? But the full glory of his love stooping to the lost, now first appears in all its completeness in Christ. In creation, indeed, he has prominently displayed his omnipotence, wisdom, and love; but here he has made known his *mercy*, his everlasting mercy; in this transaction he has opened out to the hosts of heaven, a new infinity of his perfections! Accordingly the Church sings: To God in the highest, alone be praise, and thanks be to his grace!

But the position of the words is not quite correctly given. According to the order of the original, the words, *in the height*, or *the highest*, belong not to God, but to the glory to be given; for even in heaven itself sin had troubled and disturbed the glory of God (Col. i. 20), which was now to be restored by Christ. Thus there was now a new honour, a new praise to God, that broke out in heaven from the angels, just as there was a new peace on earth among men. Thus it is not here meant (although this also is true) that God dwells and reigns in a highest height to which the angels can only look up. It is not this that is alluded to, but the heavens generally, spoken of in a plural form, and in opposition to the earth. That we men should once more be able rightly to honour God, is the subject taken up by the second chorus, after the first chorus has sung the praise of God from the height; the angels giving him glory for his omnipotence, truth, faithfulness, justice, but, above all, and in all, for his mercy.

And *peace on earth!* That sounds more intelligible than the somewhat obscure cry of the people, "Peace in heaven"

(Luke xix. 38). In heaven there has never been discord, but the ungodly on earth have no peace, no wellbeing. The earth is the abyss to which the peace-bringing grace descends from above. In the original, it is true, and especially in the Old Testament, the word *peace*, in its primitive meaning, stands for salvation, restoration, though it also expresses that which we call peace. But here it is more than peace between man and man that is meant; the great Reconciler of our strifes, puts an end to our divisions by first of all reconciling us to God. Both go together; the cause is seen and glorified in the effect. This peace on earth sounds like a far-reaching prophecy; certainly its fulfilment is still distant, and advances slowly, but it will grow and increase more and more. The angels themselves have made the first beginning of that great peace-preaching of the peace-bringer, prophesied in Isa. lvii. 19, and referred to in Eph. ii. 17. The angels see, in the new-born child, the Prince of peace, at whose birth, events being so overruled and rendered typical and prophetic by God's providence, the Roman empire had peace under Cæsar Augustus.<sup>1</sup> And now, throughout Christendom, and in missions to the heathen, progress is being made, glory is given to God by increasing peacefulness, till at last the whole perfect good-will of God shall be fulfilled toward us and in us!

And so, gazing onward to this ultimate goal, the holy angels sing at the birth of him in whom alone we are well pleasing and acceptable: *To men a good-will*. Thus we see the three clauses are closely connected. Wherefore is this glory and praise to God? For the peace-making on earth. But whence this peace? Through the child

<sup>1</sup> Hence the coin with the inscription: *Pax orbis terrarum—Salus generis humani*.

born, in whom and for whose sake God's good-will, good-pleasure, is towards men (Eph. i. 5, 6; Luke iii. 22). This is not, indeed, actually said, because it is self-evident when we turn back to the first clause: *His*, or *God's*, good-will, as well as the restoration of *men*, once lost through their sins; all this is comprehended in the many-sided whole. Thus, "the angels' lips blend together God and the Highest with men and earth in one song of praise, as though they were all one whole, one holy family" (Beck). Or, to be more precise still, both that which is in heaven and on earth, really *is*, and *will be* gathered together in Christ (Eph. i. 10). Only we must not, with over-subtlety, interpret the word *good-will* as Lange would have us do when he says, "Amongst men the good-will, in which God accepts and blesses humanity, has personally appeared." Yet there is a certain truth in the idea, and Bengel says very truly, "Until now men have had a bad name among the angels; now they in amazement proclaim the paradox, the seeming contradiction as one that is solved, 'To men a good-will!'" Or as Roos, in his *naïve* style, carries on the thought: "So cheerfully, then, do angels think of men, and it is a sin that men themselves, even believing men, should not, cannot, always think alike cheerfully of themselves and others."

Yea, verily, this is the great sin which can only be healed by the repeated going in faith to Christ, of which we have an example given by the shepherds. The evangelist writes: "And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, *the men*, the shepherds said one to another." This significant form of speech, thus linked with the third clause of the song of praise, constitutes these shepherds the representatives of all men for whom Christ is born, and brings their words, "*Let us now go*," into pro-

minence, as the "first words spoken by men in Scripture after the birth of Christ." They came with haste to the spot, to the manger indicated, *found*, soon, without much seeking (this is almost implied in the expression), found Mary, Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. For a moment they forgot, in that blessed sight, even the angels and the open heaven, and then they related, for the strengthening of Mary's and Joseph's faith—but alas! only for the *wonder* of some that heard them—the sayings which had been so miraculously told them concerning the holy child.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE ANGEL RETURNS TO JOSEPH IN DREAMS.

## MATT. II.

FEW attentive students of Scripture will be satisfied with the hypothesis that the wise men from the East arrived at Bethlehem on one of the first nights after the birth of the Holy Child ; and that both the flight into Egypt, and the return thence, took place *before* the presentation in the Temple. In harmonizing the narratives of St. Matthew and St. Luke, it is far more natural to receive Luke's statement (chap. ii. 39) as a rapid general summary of events, than to insist, contrary to the literal meaning of ver. 22, upon intercalating there the whole of Matthew's record. That so diligent an inquirer as St. Luke should have been unaware of the visit of the wise men, and the flight into Egypt consequent thereon, we hold to be most improbable. But according to the plan he proposed to himself in writing his gospel, he might very well pass over these facts. That Joseph and Mary, with the child born to them in the city of David, should remain there a while, seems very natural ; but, upon closer consideration, we see many reasons that explain the purpose of God in preventing the growing up of the child at Bethlehem, in the immediate proximity of Jerusalem. And the manner in which this purpose was fulfilled, as well as the chain of events that led to the return of the holy family to Nazareth, are given us only by

the first Evangelist in the chapter now under consideration.

We may observe that it was in a *house*, no longer in a manger, that the wise men found Him they sought for. The first divine communication made to them is spoken of (ver. 12) in precisely the same manner as that to Joseph, ver. 22. A divine injunction, of which the words are not given, warned the strangers against returning to Herod ; a similarly divine injunction is given three times to Joseph, and twice the actual words of the angel are recorded. After the miraculous testimony to his birth, it was decreed that everything connected with the wondrous child, born as he was to suffering, not to splendour, should proceed in the most simple and natural manner, with this exception, that an angelic voice was twice more to point and mark out his way. The words spoken by the angel apparently confine themselves merely to the external measures he enjoined, but there is in them a latent reference to much that is prophetic, pre-ordained, and highly significant.

It is not said whether the wise men were two, three, or more, but merely, with a grand indefiniteness, careless of all but the main point, that a divine command was given to them in a dream. Hardly as Menken would have us over-literally read : " What one dreamt the others dreamt also, and thus it was impossible for them to doubt that the dream and the injunction were a revelation from the invisible world." It is equally satisfactory to assume that one received the injunction for the rest.<sup>1</sup> Whether they were themselves suspicious of Herod, and had prayed for divine guidance, is an open question ; but this is not implied in the words of the text, and to us, indeed, it appears more pro-

<sup>1</sup> Certainly there were more than two, or the indefinite plural could not correctly be used.



bable that it was their simple-hearted confidingness in the tyrant that rendered the divine admonition necessary. If it be argued that an angel appeared to them also, because verse 22 is to be understood like verses 13, 19, we might, on the other hand, with better reason, say that both in verses 12 and 22, mere *voices* are carefully distinguished from the *appearance* of the speaker. To judge from the precision with which the different degrees of spiritual manifestations have hitherto been indicated by the evangelist, we should say that, in all probability, the last theory is correct.

It was to Joseph, not to Mary, that the divine command now came, and again in a dream, as in chap. i. 20. His paternal and guardian relation to the child was established; Mary, according to the law of marriage, was now in subjection to her husband, however contrary to all the human imaginings with regard to the "Holy Virgin" the "Mother of God" this may seem.

If, as is probable, the wise men had imparted the divine warning they had received, by way of explaining their return home by another way, contrary to Herod's will, Joseph must have surmised some threatened danger from Herod, which would have prepared him for the angel's injunction. One may indeed say with Lange: "He saw the deep seriousness with which the wise men resolved upon the other homeward way. The consequent excitement of his spirit was the element in which the ray of divine revelation kindled into flame." But too much stress is not to be laid upon these assumptions of peculiar mood and susceptibility, especially with regard to so simple a character as Joseph's, so far as the Scripture reveals it to us. Certainly a sincere devotion on his part to the child must be presupposed as the very condition of his being thus teach-

able by visions of the night. But to go on with Lange to speak of Joseph's four prophetic dreams, as the consequence of an exalted development of his sleeping consciousness, "and of the reciprocal action of Joseph's fidelity and Mary's anxious spirit," does appear to us simple-minded ones to have a dangerous tendency to convert the fact of divine revelation into a result of mere human moods, evolutions, and circumstances. Rather would we humbly hold to Scripture, which, for the most part, does not speak at all of this human substratum, and seldom explains anything thereby.

The angel now appearing in a dream spake in the following words: "*Uprisen (or uprising) take to thee the young child, and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and remain there till I tell thee (tell thee something else), for Herod intends to seek the young child that he may destroy him.*"

—The very first word enjoins haste; so soon as thou hast awaked and arisen from this sleep, this dream. Joseph, no doubt, would wake instantly, and he is as instantly to rise and prepare for flight, so near and so great is the danger threatened to that holy life. According to ver. 14, it was thus that Joseph understood and acted upon the direction given. "In the same night," no delay, not even that of a single day, but immediately, he prepares to obey, to flee as he was commanded.

In their humble circumstances, Mary and he would have but little to take with them on their journey; they would willingly leave behind what they did not want. Joseph had already, according to the angel's first bidding, as her husband and her guide, taken to him the mother; now he is especially to take the child. Every one must have observed how significant the prominence given by the Evangelist to the young child here, and in ver. 11, differ-

ing, as it does, from Luke ii. 16. The angel neither says 'thy child,' nor 'thy son,' nor even, on this occasion, 'thy wife,' as he had done before (chap. i. 20). He who is now immediately concerned is Jesus, the new-born Saviour of men and the King of the Jews. For such a flight as this, Joseph, though he may have had some vague fear of Herod's cruelty and cunning, could not possibly have been prepared. After what the heavenly hosts had announced and sung, after Simeon's prophecy and the wise men's worship, after all this honour done him, must He, whose very name is 'God with us,' flee secretly and hurriedly by night into a place of safety, that he may not be destroyed in his infancy? First there was no room for him in the inn; now there is no room for Immanuel in his own land (Isa. viii. 8).

"But wherefore flee?" As Menken observes: "Might not the angel who brought the command have encamped like a wall of fire around the child, and rendered him unapproachable? Could he not have overthrown all the weapons of human and devilish malice, like that angel who wrought such destruction in the Assyrian host? Or might he not have smitten with blindness the men commissioned to take Jesus, like those who came to take the prophet Elisha? Might not this Herod have been suddenly smitten by an angel before he could give his murderous behest, as was the case with his descendant who slew James with the sword?" Oh, we know well why none of these events happened. It was that Jesus, from beginning to end of his suffering career, should walk in our likeness, and be at once our atonement and our example. As at his life's close one out of the legions who were not permitted to fight for his kingdom, strengthened him for the death-agony, so now, out of the host of guardian and guiding angels, one is

appointed not openly to wage war in his defence, but only to direct the foster-father, before the child can even understand the direction, "Flee with him."

And not only flee from the neighbourhood of Jerusalem into Judea or Galilee, but flee to Egypt. That had been once before a land of refuge to Israel, and was now the most convenient place for the holy family in their banishment. Herod's jurisdiction did not extend thither; many Jews lived there in civil and religious liberty. Joseph might find there acquaintances whom he had previously made at the feast of the Passover, or, at all events, he would easily make friends among his countrymen in Egypt. Thus the absence from the land of Israel would be as much softened as possible. But under cover of all this, we discern in this flight to Egypt a special significance, which the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Evangelist, discloses in ver. 15.

It is worthy of remark that this passage, from Hos. xi. 1, where it applies historically to *Israel*, is not quoted from the Greek translation, then in common use, which here obscures and mutilates the prophetic text, but, agreeably to the original Hebrew, where it may be paraphrased thus: "I called this my chosen people (chosen in their forefathers), after it had been hidden in Egypt from the destroying Canaanites, in due time out of this very Egypt, and with a special calling, it being first in Egypt that I named the people of Israel *my son*" (Exod. iv. 22). Thus Israel, out of which the promised Messiah was to spring, is here, at its very outset, as well as throughout its subsequent career, a type of Christ, who, in Isaiah xlix. 3, is called the true *servant Israel*. This typical parallel is also implied in the choice of the texts wherewith Christ answered the tempter in the wilderness. Not only are we shown in

a general way that the same grief- and temptation-fraught way which Israel, his type, had traversed before, was now to be trodden by Christ himself, as forerunner, as pioneer, of that new people of God, which was to be ransomed by him out of humanity at large, and of which the old Israel was but a shadow,—not only is this clearly expressed, but the land of Egypt has a peculiar significance here. The ransomed people, the young child, are both to come forth from the house of bondage, are to be prepared under the yoke of affliction for becoming glorious through their God. Thus it is, too, that Israel's God still calls all his children out of Egypt; and thus it behoved his own Son, in so far as he was the son of man, to be actually called thence too. Short as was the stay of the child in that land, it testified to, and, as it were, incorporated this truth.

No doubt the dwelling in Egypt of the parents with the child was short, yet not so short as (according to Wieseler) to "amount to little more than a coming and a going." The chronological researches of learned men with regard to this subject are very complicated, and lead to various deductions. We judge it safest to hold simply to what is made certain to us in Scripture, which amounts to this at least, that the young child was still a young child at the time of his return; but as to limiting the period to a fortnight, or a few days, that again we hold to be incongruous with the important nature of the whole transaction. "Remain, dwell, be there;" surely this sentence of the angel's, with its "*Until* I tell thee" (bring thee word), conveys the idea of a longer space of time.

In what place in Egypt, Joseph, with the mother and child, was to dwell, and how he was to support them there, the angel does not say; but in his very command there to stay till another command be given, a promise and a secu-

urity are contained,—in the land to which he was supernaturally directed, Joseph would be certain that he might safely dwell. Neither his nor Mary's faith could doubt that, warned and delivered as they had been, they would be further helped and guided.

Certainly without such a revelation a compulsory flight like this with the child would have been almost too painful and mysterious for them to bear; for we can hardly suppose that up to this time they were quite free from other and worldly expectations for the Messiah. But now, both knew with certainty from the angel's words, that though the way lay through humiliation and distress, yet that it was foreordained by God's wisdom, and guarded by his care. When Pfenninger imagines that in the first inn reached, on the confines of Egypt, Joseph saw another angel who told him where to go, and to whom to apply, he overlooks the text, "till I tell thee" (to return to thy country). In the interim, therefore, there was evidently no manifestation to be expected. But such a special direction would not be needed amongst the Egyptians, at that time so hospitable to Jews; especially by those who were calmed and secured by the first behest, and indirectly under divine guidance, as were the shepherds when seeking the child in the manger. While Joseph and Mary sleep together with the young child, God watches over that child, and for his sake over them too. Doubtless till this moment no one knew the secret purpose of the tyrant, but the messenger of God reveals it: "Herod will seek the young child in order to destroy him." This aim will be frustrated; but the search for the child, with its terrible consequences, the murder of the innocents, will be permitted. Thus watches the providence of God over the children of men, especially over his own children in Christ: what is

ordained by him comes to pass ; all else is frustrated, and the course of events invariably fulfils the settled purpose of His will, let man struggle against it as he may (Isa. viii. 9, 10).

Joseph rises up and obeys. Mary believes, and obeys also. The young child is borne away, sweetly sleeping perhaps the while, in that unconscious reliance upon his God prophesied of in Ps. xxii. 10, 11. For the expense of this first journey, perhaps for other purposes besides, the presents offered by the wise men would suffice. The road through the wilderness, a rough one indeed, but well known, practicable, and much used, led from Bethlehem to the confines of Egypt in the course of a few days.

“*But when Herod was dead, behold.*”—The second and promised announcement is made in exactly the same way as the first, which the Evangelist indicates by using the very same words. Probably it was made by the same angel, for his address begins with the identical words before used, only that from the nature of the case, the *arise*, and *take*, and *go*, do not now imply the same immediate and imperative haste. Then it was a warning cry, “Flee!” Now it is a gracious permission, *go*, travel, as conveniently and leisurely as thou wilt! Now it is a homeward journey “*into the land of Israel.*” There is something solemn in this giving of the old name, that no longer politically appertained to it, to the beloved country from which Joseph and Mary had mourned their banishment, and to which the holy child by right belonged. The expression has also reference no doubt to the typical passage quoted by the Evangelist (ver. 15), as the context still more plainly shows. “*For they are dead who sought the young child’s life.*” But why have we the plural pronoun *they*, when Herod only is spoken of? Commentators have very un-

necessarily (disregarding the close connexion of the angel's second speech with his first) imagined that another personage was here pointed out besides the king,<sup>1</sup> probably his son Antipater, who died a few days before him. But evidently we have in this expression a quotation from Exod. iv. 9, where the passage occurs in close proximity to that which speaks of Israel as God's first-born son. Thus Moses in his own person, as Israel collectively, appears as a type of Christ, a fact which the angel brings into notice by using the same words now as were used of old. He gives the well-known proverbial expression literally, with the one omission of the word *all*, an omission intended to show that the history was only a type in its main features, not in every detail. But it must have been full of comfortable promise to Joseph and Mary: Jesus delivered as Moses was, both as child and man; Herod dead like Pharaoh.\* The reticent angel says nothing of the horrible disease of which Herod died; and the concise Evangelist, too, leaves us to learn it from the secular historian, Josephus. Neither does the angel vouchsafe any more special direction as to whither in the land of Israel the holy family must betake themselves; except, indeed, that the more general name *land of Israel*, instead of land of Judea (ver. 1), might have seemed to point at Galilee. But Joseph, to whom not only child but mother were entirely subject, might have thought, on the contrary, that the holy child ought not to belong to the despised Galilee of the Gentiles (Isa. ix. 1). It never could have occurred to his unassisted reason that Nazareth could be a fitting home for the Son of God.

<sup>1</sup> Namely, Herod's son Antipater, who, after having removed two of his brothers out of his way, was himself executed five days before his father's death.



In ver. 22 we read what ought not to surprise us, that on hearing of the succession of Archelaus to the throne, some degree of fear again mingled with Joseph's faith, not indeed on his own account, but arising from his tender, and by late events intensified anxiety, respecting the child confided to his care. Shall they return to Bethlehem, near as it is to Jerusalem? That does not seem to him judicious, though, perhaps, Mary may have urged it; for we find Joseph in uncertainty, waiting no doubt and praying for guidance, till for the third time, recorded in this chapter, the divine will is made known to him. At first only in a general way; he is fearlessly to turn aside into the *parts of Galilee*, more accurately the borders, the confines. And now, as we see, it becomes the most natural thing in the world that he should return to his former home, Nazareth. This small and despised town becomes the dwelling-place of him whose lowliness and humiliation the prophets had in many different ways foretold, and accordingly he must be called Jesus of Nazareth. In this Nazareth he grows up, lives in holy mysterious seclusion till his thirtieth year, without any further words of angels, without the occurrence of any miraculous events, till the day appointed comes for his showing unto Israel.

## CHAPTER VI.

## THE ANGELS AT THE SEPULCHRE.

MATT. XXVIII. MARK XVI. LUKE XXIV.

“HENCEFORTH ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man,” such had been our Lord’s words to his disciples, nor can we suppose they were merely metaphorical. But they were not fulfilled by visible appearances of angels to men; no angel during the whole life of Jesus having ever in his presence spoken to man. The Master being by, it behoved the servants to keep silence. When on the Mount of Transfiguration, as once before at Christ’s baptism, we catch a glimpse of an open heaven, and Moses and Elias talk *with him* of his decease, the voice that comes down from the excellent glory of the Father directs our exclusive attention to the words of Jesus: “This is my beloved Son, *Hear ye him!*”

It is at the resurrection that we meet once more with the angel voices that proclaimed the birth of the Saviour. When the time came that the disciples, cast down and despairing, were to have their sorrow turned into joy, the heavenly messengers were commissioned to bring the glad tidings before the Lord himself appears to them. Once the words “*He is born*” were joy sufficient to the shep-

herds to incite them to arise in haste, to seek, to find, to make known to all around the saying concerning the child. How much more, then, should the words "*He is risen,*" spoken of the Crucified, have power to change mourning into rapture! Yet we find their first effect to be "*fear and great joy*" (Matt. xxviii. 8); nay, even more than fear, doubt also (Mark xvi. 8); for that which they are called upon to believe is too great, too good for their belief, and would never have been preached abroad throughout the world had not the Lord by so many infallible proofs showed himself alive after his passion.

To what purpose, then, were the angelic messages to the women? We answer, in the first instance, that much as the Lord's heart yearned towards his disciples, it was necessary that he should withhold his presence from them till they had been gradually prepared, else the sudden revulsion would have been more than they could have borne. Again, it was most desirable that the future apostles should learn a lesson of faith without sight; both to humble them now, and to strengthen their patience hereafter. And also there were reasons in the very tenderness of woman's nature that led to women first receiving the tidings from the angels, and first seeing the Lord. They were the first to visit the sepulchre, and were thus rewarded.

After the Sabbath was over, it was natural that all who were not too completely distracted and overwhelmed, as Thomas, for instance, and others with him, should proceed to visit their Master's grave. And we may, perhaps, safely assume that Peter and John would have done this even without the summons from Mary Magdalene. At all events, the loving women could not refrain from seeking the Crucified there where he no longer was; even had they not purposed to complete the burial-rites, they would still

have gone unto the grave to weep there (John xi. 31). In order to escape observation they neither came singly, or all together, but in little groups of two and three, one after the other. This very circumstance helps us to harmonize the various and apparently contradictory narratives of the Easter morning. Indeed, both in the diversity and the unity of the evidence we find equal proof of its authenticity. The Evangelists did not copy from each other. Each of them narrated according to a system and to information of his own. Neither had they any intention of registering everything that happened, and how exactly everything happened in the first twilight confusion of the Easter dawn. The main point of the resurrection, on which the Church is built, was moreover so certain a fact to them that it did not even occur to their minds to lay much stress upon the details of its announcement. And if, indeed, we had more precise information as to the order in which everything connected with the angelic announcement was said and done, what would it avail us? The narrative, as it stands, is amply sufficient to make upon us the same impression the actual occurrence did upon the women—to point us to the Lord himself.

Another key to the proper harmony of the gospel accounts is this: The angels were not corporeally objective, in the same sense that our fellow-men are, were not seen and heard in the same natural way, but through the medium of some special influence upon those who saw and heard them. Thus it was only natural that on this occasion, among a number of persons of different idiosyncrasies, different impressions should be received, that one should see what another saw not, as we find Magdalene for instance, as well as Peter and John, seeing at first nothing but the empty sepulchre, though afterwards we read of

one angel, two angels visible there. Perhaps, as Lessing suggests, "the whole sepulchre; the whole space surrounding the sepulchre was filled by invisible angels." And certainly the folding of the linen clothes, and the napkin that was about the head, not only suggests invisible servants, but the multitude of the heavenly host that appeared at Christ's birth, leads us to infer an equal number present at his resurrection.

Lastly, let any one try to place himself in the circumstances of these women at the sepulchre. The shepherds of Bethlehem received their angelic communication in silent, calm expectation, but how different the case is here! After the first hurried, imperfect burial given to the sacred body by Joseph and Nicodemus, these loving, sorrowing women are come to anoint it; they have not one thought of the resurrection, they are in the deepest grief, occupied only with the idea of doing honour to their Lord's body; what a tumult of excitement must they have been thrown into by what they found, saw, heard! Well may Mark speak of their trembling amazement! If we find that the words by which Christ stilled the storm upon the water are given to us with some variation, owing to the excitement of terror under which they were heard interfering with their literal recollection, how much more so here? But yet there is a close agreement between the angel's speech, as given by Matthew and Mark; Luke records a different one, as we shall presently see.

Matthew expressly names two of the Marys, Mark adds Salome to them; Luke (xxiii. 49, 55) only speaks generally of "the women," and again refers to them (xxiv. 1), with the addition of "certain others," specifying in ver. 10 Joanna as well as the two Marys. That not only his brief summary of what the women told the disciples should be

vague as it is, but that the two earlier Evangelists, aiming as they did at the greatest conciseness possible, should relinquish all idea of a complete narrative is just what we might expect. The Holy Ghost allowed them to speak and write in their own human fashion; did not interfere with their customary style of narrative.

The following is the view we, for our parts, take of the course of events. No human eye witnessed the resurrection itself; nay, no angel dared to intrude upon its first solemnity. Not one of the four Evangelists tell us one word of how and when the Lord rose, or how he left the sepulchre; the first intelligence we have is, *The Lord is risen*, spoken by the angel. If the stone were rolled away from the mouth of the sepulchre for the Lord's egress, we might expect to find this stated in Matt. xxviii. 2, 3, which seems the natural place for the mention of such a fact. It appears to us to have been a well-grounded belief of the early Fathers, that Christ had already passed through the stone (as afterwards through the closed doors) in his own strength, and that the rolling away of the stone was only to reveal the opened and untenanted sepulchre, itself the most convincing proof of the resurrection. Then came Mary Magdalene first, hurrying on before the rest, and, not being in a proper state to discern the angelic vision, a higher one being reserved for her, she sees nothing, notices nothing, casts one glance at the open sepulchre, and then runs back in dismay to the two disciples, Peter and John (John xx. 2). Then came the other women, who (as the close connexion in Matthew leads us to believe) had already heard some rumour of the earthquake, perhaps saw some traces of it, as well as witnessed the terror of the keepers, who do not appear (ver. 4) to have at once fled away. If the angel of the earthquake, in the suddenness of his appearing, had re-

sembled a flash of lightning to the eyes of these keepers, so that they could not look at him, or gain any distinct idea of his form; to the women, on the other hand, he showed himself, as he spoke to them, in raiment white as snow, brighter than the rising sun. In the Old Testament, the angels resembled flames of fire (Dan. x. 5, 6), but after the resurrection we read of their milder radiance, and their being clothed in brightly-shining garments, white as the light. This angel having come down from heaven, and in the divine might triumphed over all obstacles and all adversaries—the triumph of life over death—now seats himself solemnly and calmly upon the rolled-away stone and the broken seals, an emblem of conquest henceforth to all humanity, but primarily to the keepers, and through their report to the frustrated Jewish and Gentile foes of the risen Lord. But to the women he did not appear thus, for they only noticed that the stone was rolled away (Mark xvi. 4). Whether he had, before he spoke, entered into the sepulchre, according to Mark's account, or whether he led the women in, as seems probable from Matthew's, who shall say? We must leave this and other points unsettled, but to us it appears most natural to suppose that this angel was actually sitting in the sepulchre as he spoke, near the place where the body had lain, just as the two angels mentioned by St. Luke were seen standing there. At all events, the words given by Matthew and Mark are the same; the angel calls the women to *come*, and see the place where Christ had lain.

These women, to whom this first speech had been addressed, were met on their way back by the Lord himself, but not till after the examination of the sepulchre had been made by Peter and John, and Mary Magdalene, lingering behind them when they went their way, had been favoured

with the first sight of the risen Saviour. She, on this occasion, saw the other angel sitting at the other side, though he was not remarked by the former women, probably because only one angel spoke. Lastly, we have the 'other women' mentioned by Luke, who either arrived later, or returned, or remained behind, to whom the same angel, now in a standing position, or two others standing, addressed other words. These last women, who only saw angels, but did not see the Lord, were those specially mentioned in Luke xxiv. 22, as we see from ver. 9. The statement in ver. 10 is a more general one.

So much we must premise to clear our way ; having done so, let us turn in all security to the *words* spoken by the angels, and first to those recorded by Matthew and Mark.

"*The angel answered.*"—This does not mean here merely, as in some other places, began to speak ; but we have it implied that he answered the terror, amazement, and questions put by the women, when they saw the stone rolled away. "*Fear not YE: for I know that ye seek Jesus, the crucified.*" In this emphatic *ye*, which St. Matthew gives, we may discern a marked allusion to the terror that the tidings of the resurrection would occasion the Lord's adversaries, and a division made from that very hour of all cognizant of the event into two parties, the friends and the foes of the crucified, parties that soon developed themselves more fully and openly both in Jerusalem and throughout the country. '*Fear not ye* (in Mark, Be not affrighted), like these keepers, who have become like dead men, fit representatives of the impotence of the Lord's enemies, and who will soon spread abroad these tidings in another form, as to them tidings of terror. Fear not *ye* as they do. For you there are good tidings prepared ; for I know your hearts, know what brings you here.' Thus graciously and sooth-



ingly does he address them, and by his knowledge of their purpose and their feelings he reveals himself to them as an angel; 'Ye know me not, but I know you! Sorrowing love brings you hither to seek, in the sepulchre, for the same Lord whom we angels worship; we are friends and brethren in him!' It is only at the close of his address that the angel introduces the majestic title, "the Lord;" at first, as if by way of transition from death to life, he uses the more familiar name of Jesus, "Jesus, *the crucified!*" The contemptuous expression is changed to a title of honour, will henceforth sound in heaven and earth as the one name that brings this Saviour's salvation to the children of men; so angels' lips teach us now; so Paul will hereafter believe and confess (1 Cor. i. 2). Mark gives us in addition the despised name, the Crucified bore throughout his earthly career, "Jesus of Nazareth;" thus also ran the writing on the cross; thus the glorified Lord named himself when speaking from heaven (Acts xxii. 8); thus the Holy Ghost spoke of him by the mouth of Peter in his first sermon on the day of Pentecost!

'You, faithful and loving souls'—so might we paraphrase the angel's words—'you seek the despised, the crucified, with an enduring love, stronger than disgrace and death; the cross has only bound you more closely, more tenderly to your Master. True, it is a seeking in the wrong place, but you are not, therefore, to be blamed; nay, there is a sense in which this may be commended as the proper way to insure the finding of Him who is risen. With love and longing to seek the crucified!—this is henceforth the distinguishing mark of those who need not *be affrighted!* He who seeks the crucified, finds the risen Saviour; and he who would find the risen Saviour must still seek the crucified.' Such is the truth the angel proclaims.

"*He is not here; for he is risen, as he said.*"—We are not, indeed, able to realize the whole of the impression these tidings must have made upon the women; but something of it is renewed in our own experience whenever, in our fight of faith, we, through fellowship in Christ's sufferings, attain to fellowship in his life. The words *not here* are placed first by Matthew, which seems more natural and appropriate than the transposition in Mark. As the open and empty grave was to bear witness before all Jerusalem—though, alas! this witness was soon covered up by fraud and unbelief—so the sight of it and of the stone rolled away were the first glad signs to the faithful women, seeking, as they were, in the wrong place indeed, but according to the best of their knowledge, and soon to have their search rewarded in a way they knew not. "*He is not here.*" For the first and only time Christ's absence a source of unspeakable joy!

How can this be? Because in very deed he was not absent. No doubt, from the moment of the resurrection, the Lord was invisibly present at the sepulchre, and amidst his faithful ones there, their eyes being hidden the while; only *he was not there* as they had expected to find him.

"*Come, see the place where the Lord lay.*"—We may remark how the angel's address becomes even more and more convincing to the timid and faintly believing women, referring them not only to Christ's disregarded and hitherto forgotten words, but to the evidence of their own eyesight. True, that evidence was not in itself decisive. Peter and John had seen the empty grave, and drawn the same inference over which Mary Magdalene wept, namely, that Christ's enemies, grudging him the rites his friends desired to perform, had carried their persecution even into the grave itself, and removed his body elsewhere.

But when an angel speaks; when he says, *Come, see*; then the words *not here* become positive proof of the resurrection. *He is not here*,—that you see; *he is risen*,—that you are to believe; *as he said*,—ye now recall his declaration and understand its meaning. *Come here*—here where I am sitting (Mark xvi. 5); so ran the encouraging words: come nearer; cast away all fear. *See*; see for yourselves, not himself, indeed, but the proof that he lives. See the empty space where, for a while, lay the lifeless body of him whom the angels also worship as Lord. Magdalene indeed said, speaking of Jesus, “*My Lord*,” with a special personal appropriation, the result ever of a true faith, as evidenced by Thomas on a later occasion. But here the angel cannot speak to the women of *their* Lord. *He* also must acknowledge and do him honour; and while speaking of the risen, living Jesus, as the Lord of men and angels, he uses the customary expression of mankind (and by using confirms it) which attaches personality to the body even after death. He does not say where *the body* (only) of the Lord lay. Christ is still a son of man in his resurrection as well as his death, and has now risen bodily from the place where *he lay*.

But finally, the women are not to content themselves with seeing and looking, the angel commissions them at once to make known the glad tidings to others: “*Go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead*.” Remain not here; cling not to this spot! The angel in no way makes a sanctuary of the grave; nor is there anything in the New Testament to lead us to suppose that any thought was taken by the disciples of the “*holy places*,” as they afterwards came to be called. Where the true life is continued unbroken, all the external, the dead, may be put away; it has done its work. We seek the living

amidst it no longer. Apostolic Christianity and the worship of relics are wide as the poles asunder. The living word, the *going* and *saying*, is not to be postponed to the wooden cross and stone sepulchre ; any superstitious value for these is a mere infirmity of faith.

These first tidings are not destined for the high-priest or for Pilate. The time for that will come later. At present, the consoling message is to be privately carried to the disciples, that *they* may believe and be prepared to witness the truth to the world. When the season for their bearing witness should come, another angel would give another command, *Go, stand in the temple* (Acts v. 20). No doubt, the expression *his disciples* included all who had believed in Christ. To all who had loved and trusted in him, the women were to give this message secretly, to comfort therewith the hearts of the whole troubled and dispersed little flock ; but more especially is it sent to the apostles, whose faith in the word and testimony of others is demanded now, as they afterwards would have to demand the faith of others in their preached word, and upon the authority of their own testimony. The official name "apostles" was no doubt familiar to the foresight of the angel, though he does not use it ; it is latent in the more general term "disciples ;" but it is evident that the future apostles were to receive the communication first and foremost amongst the disciples. This we may more especially gather from the important and remarkable addition given to us by St. Mark, who probably wrote under St. Peter's dictation.

"*Go your way, tell his disciples and Peter.*"—If, indeed, this mention had been intended especially to do honour to Peter as the first of the apostles, as some have erroneously inferred, his name would have been placed

first. But, no! It was because Peter, the denier of his Lord, in his deep sorrow feared not only to have lost his office of apostle, but even his very character of disciple, that he was here graciously restored to the latter, as he was afterwards invested with the apostleship by the Lord himself. The same Lord, whose look in the judgment-hall had brought Peter to repentance, now graciously sends him this greeting, that he may not despair. But what must not Peter have suffered between this greeting and that look! Never, indeed, could he even fully credit the greeting till the Lord himself appeared to him.

But the angel's message is not yet over: "*And, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him.*"— In Mark we have no special instructions given to announce the resurrection separately; but the passage runs: *Tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee.* In Matthew, the "behold" ushers in a more prominent mention of the *seeing* the Lord himself, for which the hearts of his hearers pined more and more as the angel went on speaking. Many, indeed, we know, saw him in Jerusalem on the very day of the resurrection; but this message to the disciples collectively does not allude to the special favour to be bestowed first on a few individuals, but to a general promise which the Lord had previously made. The place for this public manifestation to the re-assembled flock was to be the more remote, the more secluded Galilee. Galilee, sanctified and blessed as it had been by the life and teaching of the Lord, and peculiarly fitted to insure the safety of the apostles, was to be the place where, with many others, they should behold their Lord.

There is, besides, a deeper meaning, a spiritual meaning in the promise with which the first Easter message

of the angel in the sepulchre concludes. It tells of a direction, nay, a going before of the Lord, for the disciples, and for us all. The risen Saviour will be both our guide and our forerunner, will show us the way and lead us on in it while we walk on earth, and, at its close, will gather us around him in heaven.

But, on the whole, the text of these two Evangelists does not diverge so much as to lead us to suppose that they treat of different addresses by the angel. Where Mark more expressly alludes to the precious promise of the Lord (Matt. xxvi. 32; Mark xiv. 28), we have in St. Matthew the conclusion by the angel: "*Lo, I have told you.*" Now, both sentences may have been spoken, but the first may have been heard and specially noted by one of the women, the last by another. What we said of the appearance, is also true of the speech of angels; both are dependent upon the peculiar condition of those seeing or hearing. And there is a special meaning in both sayings. The *Lo, I have told you*, harmonizes well with the gracious and familiar *I know* at the beginning of the angel's speech, as given by Matthew. It is as though he said, 'All this it is my glorious commission to make known to you. I, the angel of the Lord, have *told you*; that is enough, believe, go quickly, and make known my words, till you see for yourselves that the Crucified is risen indeed.' The other conclusion in Mark's gospel, *As he said unto you*, we also gladly accept, as first weighty proof that not only what He said touching the resurrection, but that all ever spoken by Jesus shall surely come to pass.

This last thought leads us naturally to the narrative in Luke, where a similar allusion to the Lord's words is even more emphatically made. We have before stated that we, for our part, consider the angel's speech, given by Luke,

to be quite a different address from the others, and to have been delivered either to other women who came a little later, or to the first, who had returned, or to such of them as lingered behind. Their return, however, is the most probable hypothesis. The only words that this speech of these two angels has in common with that of the former, are the words that must necessarily have been spoken, "*He is not here : he is risen.*" All the rest are different. We have not *six* different angels speaking, as some have maintained, but perhaps three, or, with equal probability, only two. The first angel of the earthquake may have been alone, in which case the two men in shining garments, spoken of by St. Luke, were other two, and the same that Mary Magdalene saw. Or the second angel may have been invisible or unnoticed at first ; now he may have become manifest, and have risen up, together with the first, to deliver this second address.

More solemn, more dignified than the first simple announcement of the resurrection, more teeming still with hidden meaning, somewhat more severe in its direct application than the first soothing address, sound out the solemn, spirit-stirring words, "*Why seek ye the living among the dead?*" We are tempted, on our part, to exclaim to commentators, "Why do ye not on your part notice the difference between the tone of reproof and that of consolation?" No doubt, it is friendly reproof, and fraught with consolation as well, but how different the effect of this question to that of the gracious admission, "*I know that ye seek Jesus.*" If the first seeking were praised, here the seeking is blamed. Is not such a difference as this significant? We can only understand the words as an expression of holy impatience on the part of the angel, occasioned by a later coming of women, who seemed again about to seek for the

risen Lord in the grave they knew to be empty. But whether these last women, to whom the angel spoke, came after the others, or came back after Mary Magdalene in the garden, and the women on their way to the city, had actually seen the Lord, we will not venture to decide.

There are some, indeed, who would limit these glorious words to the lowest sense, one they might bear if spoken by the grave of any child of man; would interpret them as saying, The dead still lives; nay, the real man is not dead, it is only the corpse that lies here. But the "*not here*" of the angel has a very different meaning, and is to be understood in the scriptural sense of the words, *death and life*. Now, we find in Scripture that even immortal, undying, glorified spirits are always spoken of as the dead, before the resurrection of their body (Rev. xiv. 13; xx. 5). The allusion to the prophetic words, *for the living to the dead* (Isaiah viii. 19), which many have pointed out, is rather apparent than real, for the angel speaks here of the *living*, in a far higher sense than could apply to mere mortals who had not yet died. The Crucified is still the living. It is not merely that he lives again, that he is risen; this is mentioned later, and is, indeed, but a consequence of the first assertion; but that, as he himself says (Rev. i. 17, 18), "*I am the first, and the last, and the living one*. I was dead, and, behold, I am alive for evermore." They had killed the Prince of life, but he who is the resurrection and the life could not be holden by death, and he is risen. That Eternal Life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us (1 John i. 2), stooped indeed to death for us, but, in so doing, annihilated death. Of us sinful mortals, the term *dead* may truly be used. *He* ever liveth to give us



life. The angels' words may be understood thus: Had you known him in his life and death, as he revealed himself to you, had you recognised the difference that separated him living, speaking, suffering, and dying, from all others, you would have distinguished between the dead Christ and all other dead whatsoever. He who was unlike you in your sins, errors, failings, was unlike you in your mortality. He who was free from all taint of human vanity or selfishness, was exempted also from the universal yoke of death. The Saviour was not to be sought for amongst sinful men, neither the conqueror of death amidst death's victims. Mary the mother of the Lord, deeply as the sword had gone through her heart as she stood beneath the cross, did not, with the other Marys, thus seek the living among the dead. She (and probably Mary of Bethany too) awaited the resurrection in secret faith, instead of running to the sepulchre.

True, even as during his whole life of humiliation, Jesus had, in a certain sense, been numbered with the dead, so his body yielded to the power of death while it lay in the grave, his spirit, while it descended into Hades. But now the bringing again from the dead had begun (Heb. xiii. 20), it was completed in the ascension (John xx. 17). Henceforth his word is accomplished, "Because I live, ye shall live also." This saying had not been as yet rightly understood by his disciples, nor did the women who came to the sepulchre remember these words and others of like import. But "God will not have us seek and anoint a dead Saviour." This quotation from Rieger points to a comprehensive application of this profound angelic saying, superior as it is, indeed, in depth and fulness of meaning to all other angelic sayings whatsoever, which are, for the most part, plain, simple, and human. It was fit that such words

as these should be uttered at the miraculously opened sepulchre. Even Hegel seems to have been struck by them, for he says that "in the Crusades, this answer of the angel was given once more to Christendom at Christ's sepulchre." But this only applies to the actual sepulchre, whereas we both may and ought to give a far wider application to this solemn question, in order fully to penetrate its meaning. Amongst the dead of all ages who have bequeathed their memory, their words, their works to mankind, *he* is not to be sought and found as one who is only their equal, for *he* is essentially other than they; in Himself and for humanity, for the Church especially, He is the Living One! We have an actually existing, a present Christ, not merely a historical one. Neither must we seek for him in the wrong place, least of all in our own natural unrenewed selves. No, nor yet in the world, or the men of the world, who, as the dead, bury their dead (Matt. viii. 22). Nor again, in dead Christians or a dead Christianity, although it possess all the outward semblance of truth. Nor yet in the dead letter of traditional teaching, nor in church membership, nay, not even in the literal words of Scripture itself. He himself, and he alone, is the Living One, and will be sought as such. He is in nowise to be found in any dead thing, though he may once have been contained therein as in the empty sepulchre.

At that time, indeed, the angel had not power to say, "Seek him among the living!" But this has been possible for us ever since the day of Pentecost. There are now Easter-day messengers who, though they do not wear shining raiment, yet carry about within them, and bring to us the life of Christ. Each true Christian is in his measure one of these. Yea, those who seek the crucified have been secretly drawn to do so by the life of the

Living One, though they themselves have been unconscious of it. Thus the second severer address of the angel is, after all, reconcilable with the first more gracious one. *To seek*, that is the main point. Let us, thirsting for life, seek him, the Living One, and we shall find him as for us crucified, for us risen!

“*He is not here, but he is risen!*”—This resurrection fulfils all he ever testified of himself. The first-begotten from the dead is also revealed as the faithful witness (Rev. i. 5). If the first address of the angel reverts to what *he said to the women*, the second does this still more, in order gently to reprove and chasten the forgetful, dull of understanding, unbelieving hearers of those encouraging words. “O fools, and slow of heart to understand all this prophet, who was more than prophet, said to you!” The women who followed Christ believed indeed, as did the disciples, that Jesus was a great prophet; consequently the angel refers them to the past, tells them why they ought to have known enough not now to seek the living among the dead: “*Remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.*” In the two former Gospels, we had a prophetic intimation of Christ’s going before them into Galilee. Here we have a retrospective allusion to his saying when in Galilee. This is another harmonious difference between the two angelic addresses. The very words of the Lord are reverently given by the angel, who had listened to them, and faithfully treasured, while the women had forgotten them, till now, when we read “*They remembered his words;*” reflected upon them, understood them. “*They told all these things unto the eleven, and to all the rest.*” In this rapid general summary with which St. Luke con-

cludes, we have included what the two disciples on the way to Emmaus alluded to when they spoke of the vision of angels seen by certain women (Luke xxiv. 22, 23). These women had said *that he was alive*. This harmonizes well with the expression *the living*,—who was not to be sought for among the dead;—nay, perhaps, but for the fact of the *third day* being brought by the angel to the recollection of the women, neither these men, nor those still more incredulous disciples who had treated the women's vision as idle tales, would have called to remembrance that the day on which all this occurred was that very *third day* of which the Lord had spoken.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ANGEL'S QUESTION TO MAGDALENE

JOHN XX.

WE have here but a few short simple words that seem scarcely susceptible of further elucidation ; and yet, taken in connexion with their context, they will be found to repay our meditation. This Mary Magdalene, delivered by the miraculous power of Jesus from a condition the most abject and appalling (Mark xvi. 9), and in the deep devotedness of her grateful love, perhaps exceeding all the rest of his female disciples, was on this Easter morning the sorrowfullest of the sorrowful, and for this reason was chosen to receive the first manifestation of the Lord. She had come earliest of all, come while it was yet dark, to the opened grave ; and at the very first sight of it, the only thought that rose in her grief-clouded mind was that the body had been taken away, and certainly not by friends. She ran to fetch the two leading disciples, that they too might see what so dismayed her. They had come, had convinced themselves that it was even as she said, and had gone away again. Yes, even the loving and beloved disciple himself had returned home with only a deepened sadness in his heart. But Mary cannot go with him. She cannot depart from this mysteriously empty grave. In

the depths of her anguish there is an unconscious presentiment that something else will surely occur in connection with this terrible fact. She seeks the Crucified with all the intensity of a nature alike earnest and tender.

And so "*she stands without at the sepulchre, weeping,*" bitterly weeping; but as is natural to us all in our deepest sorrow, she must needs look and look again at the very cause of her grief. She stooped down and looked into the empty grave, as Peter had done before (ver. 5). And *now* she sees what the seeking disciples had not seen. In the increased susceptibility of her ever-growing sorrow, she sees two angels in white, sitting, probably the two of whom St. Luke writes; but this we cannot positively say. Their bright shining garments showed them to be angels; and St. John describes their exact position, the one at the feet, the other at the head; but Mary Magdalene, intent only on the body of Jesus, pays no heed to them, though she clearly discerns them; for, alas! the beloved head, the beloved feet are not there. And now both shining ones speak at once to the weeping woman; and their words, short as they are, are one of the most beautiful of all angelic addresses; the most tender, the most sympathizing with our humanity.

"*Woman, why weepest thou?*"—In this question there is something implied, though more gently expressed, akin to the reproachful question recorded by St. Luke, "Why seek ye the living among the dead?" But here the holy impatience merely shows itself in an anxiety to comfort; 'Why weepest thou so continuously and so causelessly?' The sentence seems to have been cut short, because Mary heeded it so little, and because the Lord himself appeared, repeating the very question of his angelic servants. We might almost infer that on this occasion the latter had had

no commission given them to speak, but that they followed their own kindly impulse to address the sorrowing woman. For angels are ever willing to succour weeping mortals; and these might perhaps have proceeded to accost the woman still more graciously by name, but that this was to be their Lord's part, and they therefore refrained.

Mary Magdalene returned a hasty answer, without showing any fear of the shining forms in the sepulchre; nay, she hardly seems to have noticed that there was anything superhuman about them, for she is reckless in her grief. The one lamentation—her first (ver. 2) lamentation—which heaven and earth shall hear, which fills her heart,—the only thing which she knows and cares about, constitutes her reply to the angels. It is as though she said, 'How should I not weep, wretched woman that I am? They have taken away (not only the Lord, as she had said to her brother disciples, she speaks more strongly to these bright strangers),—they have taken away *my* Lord, and I know not where they have laid him; let me weep.' And she turns away from the speakers like a Rachel who will not be comforted. But there is comfort in store for her, sorrow as she may. We have an example given us here of how only the Lord himself can suffice to spirits like that of Magdalene. The Lord sees the heart, and none shall weep for him in vain; but even the angels, gracious though their sympathy be, must leave the task of comforting the deepest sorrow to the Lord.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## THE ANGELS AT THE ASCENSION.

## ACTS I.

It was on the fortieth day after his resurrection, that the Lord, with his apostles and the rest of his disciples, assembled by appointment for the last time on the Mount of Olivet. When they were come together, the disciples put one last question, prompted by the Lord's discourse on the things pertaining to the kingdom of God, and expressive of a holy, though not a well-informed longing on their part for its arrival. This question was to the following effect: 'Will what is written in the prophets concerning thy divine kingdom, under the name of the Kingdom of Israel, be speedily accomplished, or is this accomplishment still far off?' And the Lord's answer to this question is the last of all his sayings on earth. On the point of ascending from them into heaven, he refuses to his disciples any further information respecting the times and seasons of the development and fulfilment of the kingdom of God; withholds all dates, all numerical statements as to epochs or persons. But instead of these he gives them the promise of soon receiving the Holy Ghost. As the Gospels have led us onward from the first to the second article of our belief, and the whole of that which Jesus began to



do and teach may be summed up in the words, "Ye believe in God, believe also in me;" so now we are about to be led onward by the Acts of the Apostles (or, as we might rather call the book, the History of the Church), from the second to the third article of our Christian faith. But in thus referring to the Holy Ghost, the Saviour, about to ascend into heaven though he was, directs the attention of his disciples from heaven to earth; to earth, where his witnesses were to begin to found and establish his kingdom, by building up the Church, through the Divine power working within them. The Lord ascends to heaven, that henceforth he may live, work, and reign on earth through his people and in his people.

Such is the meaning of his last words; and as he spoke these things he was taken up before their eyes, with lifted hands; hands raised in priestly benediction over these his disciples—over the holy city and the chosen land—over the whole earth. "*While they beheld,*" he was taken up. Visibly and gradually he began to ascend towards heaven; not suddenly vanishing from before them, as he had done several times since his resurrection, but rising in a way that they could watch; not like the prophet Elijah, swept away by a whirlwind and in a chariot of fire. For, as it has been very well observed by Baumgarten, "The interval of space betwixt earth and heaven was not overleapt by a sudden act, but measured out by a calm and continued progress, and so the past earthly career of Jesus in no way cut off or obscured, but retained as an eternally-enduring foundation, and glorified by a heavenly light. If the translation of Elijah may be likened to the flight of a bird which no human eye can trace, the ascension of Jesus is like a bridge spanning earth and heaven, for the benefit of all who have been led

to him by the beauty of his earthly life." His ascending form was first concealed by a cloud, and this cloud only gradually and slowly rose and melted out of their sight. "Looking steadfastly up into the heavens" that had received him, petrified, immovable, the apostles gazed on and on, as though they could still see their vanished Lord; they could not turn their eyes or their thoughts back to earth again! Surely the comfort and guidance of an angel's voice was never more needed than at a moment like this.

Whether the "two men in white apparel," that suddenly appeared standing beside them, were the angels that announced the resurrection, may well be doubted, when we consider the multitude of the heavenly host, ready and willing ever to minister to man. In Luke xxiv. 4, we find the expression used slightly different, perhaps designedly so. But from a comparison with that passage, as well as with Acts x. 30, and Dan. ix. 21; viii. 15; x. 5, we feel persuaded that at the ascension we have the actual presence of angels recorded, and not that of glorified saints, like those who appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration.

But not only did they appear and stand by, but they spoke; they "also said," as Luke emphatically writes, in order to bespeak our attention to the words of the men from heaven to the men of Galilee on earth. This angelic appearance to the disciples must have been, as Lange observes, "a merely *secondary* wonder, a commonplace occurrence, compared to their last sight of their glorified Lord; it seems as though angels themselves were destined, on this occasion, not to excite their astonishment, but to recall them to the sphere of their ordinary consciousness, so entranced and absorbed were they in gazing after their Lord." Yea, verily, after the last word from Jesus, these heavenly speakers served to make the transition back from

the heaven, where they would be, to their continued living and working upon earth, easier and more intelligible to the disciples. Accordingly, the angelic words run as follows : “ *Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.*”

Three times in succession the word *heaven*, and this in order to recal to earth! Yet this recalling from their raptured gazing to earthly consciousness and earthly activity, is implied in the very first words of this rousing appeal, *Ye men of Galilee*; for certainly most of those present were Galileans; indeed, we may almost infer that all were so, Judas of Kerioth (Josh. xv. 25), the traitor, having been the only disciple belonging to Judea. This calling up of all their Galilean recollections, graciously reminded them of the low commencement of their earthly career, of their being found and called by the Lord, of the time when they became his disciples and lived with him; all this would be comprehended in one far-reaching, retrospective glance, like, in a measure, to that which Jesus cast upon the earth that he left. But these men are to remain on earth as the Lord's apostles, chosen out of that highly-favoured Galilee, that hitherto had had, not as the doctors of the law mistakenly believed, “no prophet” (John vii. 22), but only Jonah (2 Kings xiv. 25) and Nahum. The name Galilean, now a term of ridicule and contempt, should be rendered honourable by them, as the name of Jesus of Nazareth had been glorified by the resurrection.

And now again, as before at the sepulchre, we have a reproof implied in the question put: *Why stand ye gazing thus into heaven?* Before, the women were admonished

to look away from the sepulchre, and now the disciples must be content to part with all trace of their Lord's visible presence. Since Jesus had actually *gone away from* them into heaven, it was vain to stand and gaze. Enough that he was gone to prepare a place for them; while for them there remained a walking in and working according to his commandments, as well as in his strength and fellowship, upon this earth of ours. This pregnant speech, universally applicable to disciples as it still is, dissuades from and chides all idle waiting, all inactive longing and dreaming, all presumptuous inquiries that transcend the limits of our world; and constantly enjoins, and encourages us to the faithful discharge of our appointed duties in the life that now is. Thus the very first words of the angels are a continuation, as it were, of the last words of the Lord, and deeply imbued with the same spirit. '*Why stand ye?*' Remember the last question ye put to your Lord. You know your duty already. It is to go forth out of your Galilee into all the world, and to preach the gospel to every creature. Look below you; there is Jerusalem, there is the appointed place for your first witnessing of Jesus, for the exercise of your faith and obedience; tarry there, and tarry in sure and certain hope.'

And now comes a second intimation, which the Lord had left to be delivered, on this occasion, by these angelic ministers of his. He had spoken of the Holy Ghost, and of the building up of the Church; they point to the end of all times and seasons, to his second coming to judgment. "*This same Jesus shall so come.*" *Ye men of Galilee; this same Jesus*; the two are brought into close contact, no intervening mention of the heavenly messengers themselves. The single name Jesus, which Gabriel announced at the first, is here emphasized, in token that, although

withdrawn from their sight, the now exalted and glorified personality of the God-man would still remain unchanged in its essential character. He is, he ever will be, *the same Jesus*; there is here a profound truth, an infinite source of consolation and strength, the full appreciation of which led Peter, on the day of Pentecost, to use these very words: "Jesus of Nazareth; him ye have crucified; whom God raised up;" *this Jesus*; yea, the same Jesus still! (ii. 22, 24, 32, 36). All the humanity, and all the divine power; all the humiliation, and all the wondrous works; all the truth witnessed, and all the love shown, by this same Jesus, would rush back upon their memories at once at the words, and they are spoken now in connexion with a new fact, "*who is taken up from you into heaven.*" From you men upon earth; just as the first words to the shepherds were, "There is born to you a Saviour" (Luke ii. 11). There is, indeed, a taking up, a taking away *from us, from earth*; the heaven into which our Lord has entered being not merely a *state* but a *place*, but there is no real separation from him, he being by his Spirit still present with us.

He will "*so come*" as ye have seen him "*go.*" Both events are equally real, and between them lies the whole history of the Christian Church, the first part of which St. Luke was now about to write. The passage is often mistakenly rendered, "he will come again." But that word "again" would be misplaced here. It is not the antithesis of *taken up* like the *shall descend* in 1 Thess. iv. 16. And also we find that henceforth it is customary with the writers of the New Testament to speak emphatically of the *coming* (not coming again) of the Lord in glory to judgment, because this will really be his first perfect coming, the fulfilment and proof of his lowly coming in th.

flesh. It was thus the Lord himself always spoke of it, even in the parable of the talents (Luke xix. 13-23). It is only in John xiv. 3 that a *coming again* is definitely expressed; in ver. 18 of the same chapter the word *again* is omitted. This last, this all-fulfilling coming of the Lord; alas! how sadly have many Christians, in the present day, lost sight of it altogether; and yet, it is not only the very key-stone of all revealed truth, but faith and hope therein are the very life of all Christian character and activity. There is a fictitious looking up into heaven, indeed, which is reprovèd; but the true, the right looking up of the Christian is ever commended; the *waiting* for God's Son from heaven (1 Thess. i. 10). But now as to the question of how soon or how late he will come? Naturally the angel does not affix any time after what the Lord himself had said (ver. 7). So much the more strongly in its simplicity runs the promise, "He *will* come." It is not necessary that the angel should, on this occasion, add, *as he said*, for now the disciples vividly remember the Lord's words, spoken to them so often, both openly and in the form of parable, up to the very last (John xxi. 22; Matt. xxvi. 24).

But though we are not told *when* he will come, we are told *how*: "*In like manner as ye have seen him go.*" As the Son of man, visible to human sight, as the same Jesus, and in *a cloud* (Luke xxi. 27). And it is also probable that the expression, in the same way, may have a mysterious reference to the very place, the Mount of Olives, as certain passages in the prophets, agreeably to an ancient and well-grounded exegesis, might lead us to infer (Zech. xiv. 4, 5; Joel iii. 7). Still this last point remains open to dispute, but one thing is certain; the coming of Jesus will be visible as was his departure, and incomparably more glorious, though this the angel leaves unsaid, because the

Lord's own words had established the fact (Luke xxi. 27 ; Matt. xxiv. 30 ; xxv. 31, to which we may add 1 Thess. iv. 16). Now, of all the thousands of thousands who welcome him to his throne in heaven with joy and rapture, only these two men in shining raiment are visible. Then he shall come with all the holy angels (Mark viii. 38 ; Matt. xvi. 27).

Another clause in the angel's comforting, re-assuring speech deserves our special attention. Pointing as it does from heaven back to earth, it appeals on behalf of all other men, to the experience and the testimony of those whom it addresses: "*as ye have seen him!*" Indeed, how do we know of this very speech of the angel, save from the testimony of these trustworthy men of Galilee who here record what they saw and heard? If there be any who seriously incline to doubt this statement, behold its proof in the whole history of the Acts of the Apostles, and the history of the Church up to this very day, up to the last day of all. *Ye shall be my witnesses*, thus said the Lord, and they were and are so. He has built up his Church before our eyes. In it we already see him coming in his kingdom. The existence of Christianity proves the divinity of its origin. And not only the history of the Church, but the history of the universe, of heaven and earth both, is included between the first and second coming of the Lord, *of this Jesus*, the God-man in whom the earth is exalted to the mercy-seat of the Highest. Yea, when He who is taken up into heaven, He whom the apostles saw go into heaven, shall come down from heaven, unbelief itself will be forced to own that His first coming was from heaven also. The angels do not say to these early disciples and apostles, *ye shall so see him come*. Yet, doubtless, though after another fashion, they shall be there, and their eyes shall see.

And now, what do we learn from all this? Are the words of these angels intended to prevent our looking up into heaven? Far otherwise; man, in the obscurity and oppression of his present limited existence, never has, never can cease to do so; nay, an earnest, thoughtful, upward glance such as the prophet Isaiah enjoins (xl. 26), is the very thing to awake man's belief in the existence of God. But faith in Christ, in the revelation, comfort, and power of the Holy Spirit, is itself the real, the true looking into heaven; faith in Christ, as having entered into heaven's glory, as being the dispenser of the Spirit to his kingdom on earth; as the all-accomplisher, redeemer, and judge, who shall come from heaven at the end of this dispensation. He who thus looks up into heaven does not remain idly standing as he gazes. His glance will not remain fixed thereon in blank astonishment, or even ardent desire such as that of the disciples, still less will it sink incredulously back to earth to fix itself there like that of the worldly-minded; no, it will be the heaven-strengthened glance of the witness of the Lord on earth, who lives and works in the good hope of faith, looking for the time when this same Jesus will re-unite earth and heaven. *Now*, indeed, the throne is above, the kingdom below; but *then* the king shall dwell with his people, in the new heaven and the new earth which we look for according to his promise.

All this, *then*, is included in the angelic address at the ascension, in these last words which angels add to the last words of Christ. And, as answer to them, there arises in our hearts and to our lips the oft-repeated cry of believers and saints from that time to this, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" For this is in no way forbidden us; nay, we are encouraged so to pray, both by the Lord's parting words and those of his angels.



## CHAPTER IX.

## THE ANGEL OPENING THE PRISON DOORS.

## ACTS V.

SINCE the day of Pentecost, the witness of the apostles to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus had been given with great power, the Church began to count its numbers by thousands, the gift of the Holy Ghost was offered to all who believed and were baptized. It was openly preached that the Messiah, the Saviour rejected by the Jews, although ascended into heaven, was sent to them once more in the Spirit to bestow a time of refreshing, to turn away every one from his iniquities (iii. 20-25). This provoked a slight persecution which, gathering strength, began openly to oppose the one name through which men can be saved (iv. 12). But the unworthy threats to which this opposition condescended only awakened a fresh spirit of prayer in the Church, an increased zeal in speaking and teaching the Word of God. Such, indeed, was the great power of the apostolic testimony, and the great grace upon all, that the multitude of them that believed had all things in common: the rich not esteeming what they possessed their own; the poor lacking nothing.

But judgment must begin first at the house of God (1 Pet. iv. 17). The Achan of the New Testament, with

his wife, had to be cast out and sentenced to death, so that great fear fell upon all. After this many signs and wonders continued to be wrought among the people, even by the very shadow of Peter falling upon the believing sick. The prayer of the Church (iv. 30) was abundantly fulfilled. No enemy nor hypocrite dared to join himself to the congregation; but the majority of the people magnified them, and believers were more and more added to the Lord (ver. 14).

But now for the second time the enmity excited bursts with redoubled strength through all the restraints of wonder and fear. The high-priest Ananias, and all the rest of the Sadducees which were with him (iv. 1, 2), could endure it no longer; they rose up, and were filled with indignation. They were not, perhaps, actually authorized in so doing, by a decree of a regular assembly (ver. 17 does not seem to imply this); but, at all events, they must have been aware that the council was on their side (ver. 27), when they ventured to lay hands on the two apostles now recognised as the leaders of the party, and to put them in the common prison. For on this occasion we find that they were no longer put in hold till the next day, as in chap. iv. 3, but thrown into the public jail for malefactors of every kind. This the high-priest and they that were with him ventured to do in spite of the reverence of the people (ver. 13), though later we find that they dreaded lest they should have been stoned of them, in the event of their using further violence against the apostles.

But God's time was now come for adding another sign to the miracles of judgment and of healing hitherto recorded. These daring adversaries with whom the divine patience had so marvellously borne, were not indeed to be given over to destruction, but to receive a most emphatic

warning to refrain from these men, and let them alone, lest haply they be found fighting even against God. The intervention which could not, agreeably to the counsel of God, shield the Lord Jesus himself, since his death was to procure life for us, now avails in the case of his witnesses and ambassadors. Out of the willing legions of angels, one is permitted to stand forth and rescue the apostles from the false-hearted rulers of Israel. True, he does not fight for the kingdom of grace and mercy with aggressive and overwhelming might; he merely protests in action, simply and quietly, against the imprisonment of the servants of the Word.

No angel interfered on behalf of Peter and John the first time hands were laid on them; a little later, too, we shall see Stephen fall beneath the stones of his jealous enemies, as well as the apostle James by the sword of Herod, for the kingdom of Jesus is still and ever the kingdom of the cross. But at intervals tokens of the divine power will be made manifest; on this occasion to insure to all the apostles a further period of undisturbed preaching; hereafter to insure Peter's flight.

*“But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison-doors, and brought them forth, and said, Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.”*  
—This miracle happened in the night, that its nature might be known to the faithful alone; its effects merely to others. Probably the keepers on this occasion neither saw nor heard anything unusual, at least this is the impression that ver. 22, 23, makes upon the mind. The angel had invisibly opened and closed the prison-doors “with all safety,” and infringed no further upon human law and prison discipline than his commission positively required. We have no details given us here of the manner

of egress, as in chap. xii. 7, 8. The stress is laid upon the renewed preaching. Later, in Philippi (xvi. 26), we read of an earthquake, and of all the prisoners' bands being loosed. Now, there is nothing recorded but the quiet bringing the apostles forth. Everything has its due season in the ways and works of the Lord.

There is, in the sacred history, a close connexion between one stage of development and another. It reveals itself as a well-ordered and progressive whole, and, accordingly, the same law is observable throughout the smallest details of its miraculous events. Thus the words of the angels recorded in the Acts of the Apostles seem to be links of one and the same chain, so that each succeeding address appears in continuation of the last. That which, in the address of the angels at the ascension (that address being itself closely linked with the last words of Jesus), was left unspoken, though implied throughout, now shapes itself into the general command, Go and bear witness on earth to him who is in heaven. In connexion, again, with this, we have (viii. 26) the angel pointing out to Philip a special occasion for preaching Christ beyond the walls of Jerusalem, a silent preparation this for spreading the gospel among the Gentiles also. Then, just as Philip was expressly sent to the Ethiopian eunuch, we next find Cornelius directed by an angel to the apostle Peter. Afterwards, in chap. xii., comes a second deliverance of Peter from prison, after the death of James, that men might know that the Lord's witnesses were rescued, or permitted to suffer death and bonds according to His own good pleasure. Finally, in the thoroughly typical narrative of the shipwreck of the other great apostle, Paul, an angel appears for the last time recorded in the historical books, not only to certify that Paul must stand before Cæsar, but to show that in this hour

of great peril God's protecting mercy extends to all the companions of his servants as well.

Thus, then, we can now the better understand the position occupied by the first prison-opening angel in the record of Holy Writ, taken as a whole. Thus his first words are felt to be fraught with a deeper meaning than their simplicity at first suggested: "Go." Spite of all the threats of men, the angel repeats that command given by the Lord just before his ascension, *Go ye therefore* (Matt. xxviii. 19; Mark xvi. 15); refers expressly to it, as Peter himself does, when he declares, "We ought to obey God rather than men; we are his witnesses of these things." The angel does not add, "Fear not" (as in xxvii. 24, in the imminent peril of shipwreck), but the expression he uses has something of the same spirit. The apostles are to go and *stand*; to occupy their former place boldly and confidently. Stand forth and speak out, as your office is. We find that, in the united prayer of the church (iv. 29), "all boldness to speak thy word" was the only result implored, not protection against its threatening adversaries. But now that the sought-for signs and wonders have been abundantly granted, boldness and freedom in speaking are to be still further increased. On a future occasion, after the apostles have been beaten, and received further fruitless injunctions to refrain from preaching, we find no such angelic interposition on their behalf, nor do they then need it. They only rejoice that they are counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus, and utterly disregard the bodily pain inflicted.

"In the *temple* to the *people*," so the angel's short, rapid injunction runs. In despite of the rulers, who will not hear, and unto the people, who will, are the words of salvation to be preached. The builders, who have set at

nought the true corner-stone, are now rightfully deposed from authority. Their command is nothing worth; therefore the preaching is, in spite of all the policy of the rulers of Israel, to take place publicly in the temple as before; in that same porch of Solomon, in which once the Lord himself had gathered around him the sheep who heard his voice (ver. 12; John x. 23). "*All the words of this life.*"—This is the main as well as the final point. And what is *this life*? Plainly the *new* life brought to light and triumphant in the resurrection of the Lord (iv. 33), which the poor efforts of the Sadducees would vainly seek to bind, and quench, and bury. Compare the "word of life" (Phil. ii. 16), and "the word of this salvation" (Acts xiii. 26). *This life*; the expression reminds us of the one so recently used by an angel, *this* Jesus. But again, this great word of life is to be set forth now in many words; of *all* the words of this life the apostles are not to keep back or omit one. Such was the decree from above. God's word is not bound (2 Tim ii. 9). "Even as Jesus, by the very naming of his name, cast his enemies down to the ground before they could lay hands upon him, thereby giving positive and palpable proof that he submitted to their power of his own free will, so now, by the sending of his angel, the whole council in their utter perplexity (ver. 24) are taught that they could have no power at all over these witnesses of Jesus, except it were given them from above." Thus Baumgarten justly interprets this sign of deliverance, which, like the signs of healing, was appointed to give free course to the words of the witnesses.

"Go and *speak.*" Obedient to the command, the apostles straightway enter early into the temple and teach there. The fact of a miracle having been wrought is so proved by this result, that the enemies of the gospel take good care

not to ask the apostles how they got back to the temple, through prison-doors shut with all safety, and keepers standing without. The Pharisees could not but own that it was God's work; the Sadducees, in spite of their scepticism, may have suggested, "An angel has done this." But Peter, however, says nothing about the angel; only insists positively on the main point which the Council have reluctantly to hear for the second time: "Jesus, whom ye slew, is risen, is exalted on God's right hand, to give repentance to Israel, and remission of sins." And when the Council reject this testimony, the witnesses, disregarding threats and stripes, turn obediently to the people, "and daily in the temple, and in every house, cease not to teach and preach Jesus Christ."

## CHAPTER X.

## THE ANGEL DIRECTING PHILIP.

## ACTS VIII.

WE consider this to be a proper place and time openly to express our opinion, that the angelic appearances, services, and speeches recorded in Holy Writ are by no means to be considered the only ones ever vouchsafed to man. How, for instance, can we believe that, during the long period of time comprehended in the Old Testament history, angels so rarely interposed on the behalf of God's servants, when we find so many passages in the Psalms, and so many more expressions used by our Lord, and interspersed throughout the whole New Testament, that tell of the frequent, nay, the regular and persistent interest felt, and part taken, by them in the destiny and history of man? On the contrary, we are persuaded that by far the greater portion of occurrences of the kind have been left by Holy Scripture in the background, left to private tradition among believers. For it is far from being the intention of Scripture to give to what we mortals call "the marvellous" (which sceptics reject, and the superstitious distort) any such prominence as might obscure the moral wonders wrought by the Spirit in the hearts and minds of the children of men. The Apocrypha invents much that is con-



trary to historical truth; the Bible keeps back much that actually happened; Raphael, in the book of Tobias, speaks more than all the angels recorded in Scripture put together.

But such instances of angelic interposition as Scripture does select for our instruction, we shall find to be all significant and representative. In how many judgments may not God's angelic servants be still the actors, whether to destroy or to save! How many a despairing man of God may, like Elias, have been roused and admonished by an angel, more or less evidently! To how many parents and guardians may God's will concerning those committed to their care, be revealed now as it was to Joseph! And lastly (as in the Acts of the Apostles), how often may the Lord's witnesses have been preserved from persecution and imprisonment; have had a way opened out to their activity; have been comforted and upheld by these heavenly messengers—sometimes openly, as in the history of the Church here recorded, but far oftener secretly, and after a manner of which these visible instances in early times were but the type.

After the contest between the preaching of the gospel of life and the opposition of the Jews had reached a climax, a new way had to be made for spreading the word to all lands and among all nations. The irresistible wisdom and spirit by which Stephen spoke, having been silenced by stoning, the persecution broke forth with renewed vigour, its results being only, by scattering abroad the apostles, to diffuse their doctrines the more widely. Jerusalem had rejected the words of salvation, accordingly they were now to be sent to the Gentiles. But this first turning from the uncircumcised in heart and ears to the uncircumcised after the flesh, which caused the latter to rejoice and glorify God, had to be gradually brought about. The offer of salvation was next to be made to the Samaritans, as our

Lord himself appointed (i. 8), then to the proselytes. The gospel was to be openly proclaimed to Cornelius, but previously to be privately preached to the Ethiopian eunuch.

Thus we have again two turning-points, which required the aid of angels. Cornelius and Peter were mutually directed the one to the other: the Gentile by an angelic message; the apostle by a vision, and a voice from the Lord himself. In the case of Philip, we find that nothing was needed but a mere direction as to the way he should take in order to find the ready recipient of his message. The public announcement of God's purpose respecting the Gentiles was to be made first by Peter (xv. 7-11), but before this event, a less distinguished servant of God was appointed secretly to convert and baptize the Ethiopian. The seven deacons, of whom we read in the sixth chapter, were originally chosen not merely to "serve tables," but had other gifts, privileges, and duties, and were entitled by their office to speak the word. Accordingly, we find Philip taking the place of the martyred Stephen; preaching Christ, however, in Samaria, since the dispersion of the Church had made his ministration in Jerusalem unnecessary. Nor was he preaching merely under the control of the apostles, but as a chosen and appointed Evangelist, under which name we meet with him later in Cesarea (xxi. 8; compare viii. 40). Yet it agrees perfectly with this that the rite of baptism performed by him, should need to be confirmed and completed by the laying on of hands of the apostles, before the Samaritan converts could receive the Holy Ghost. Nor was Philip humbled thereby, but rather comforted and honoured by such a seal set to the success of his mission, though it appears reasonable to suppose that the lamentable fall from the faith, of Simon the sorcerer, whom perhaps Philip had

been rather premature in baptizing, must have deeply afflicted the Evangelist. We think we can discern traces of his having somewhat lost heart. While the apostles, on their return to Jerusalem, preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans, he seems to have lingered in Samaria, not rightly knowing whither he should go next, or what he should do. While in this condition, the angel points out the way he is to take, in order, according to the loving purpose of God, to meet with a rich compensation for Simon's defection; the Ethiopian's humble, teachable spirit, and willingness to believe, affording a most complete contrast to the insincerity and subtlety of the sorcerer.

Although it is not expressly stated, we incline to believe that the angel who spoke to Philip at the same time visibly appeared to him, the intimation he afterwards received (ver. 29) being spoken of in different terms. The first summons to preach the gospel to one wholly unknown, was doubtless given by the angel in a voice from without; afterwards, when Philip saw the traveller sitting in his chariot and reading the Prophet Isaiah, the voice of the Spirit within him, by which he was habitually guided, would be sufficient to impel him to join himself to that chariot, and to help the Ethiopian to an understanding of what he read.

*“ Arise, and go along toward the south, on the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.”*  
—Thus, we take the angel's speech as a whole, and believe we can penetrate its whole meaning, even the unexpressed hint that lies beneath the simplicity of the literal words. This call to arise and go along was intended to rouse and cheer the downcast and irresolute spirit of the Evangelist, not merely to preface the angel's further directions. It was equivalent to saying: ‘Thou shalt not return to Jeru-

salem with the apostles, neither shalt thou remain in the city of Samaria. There is a wider field before thee. Arise cheerfully and courageously, and go unto the place that I shall tell thee.' Then the angel proceeds to indicate the way Philip is to take so precisely that he cannot possibly go wrong; just as we shall presently find the house of Simon the tanner, by the sea-side, minutely described to Cornelius.

The Evangelist's next station was to be in what was formerly the land of the Philistines, for we read that he was found in Azotus (the Ashdod of old). But, in the first instance, he must betake himself, not indeed to Gaza, but only to the way leading down to it, which is expressly specified as *desert*, little frequented. At first this seems to be a mere topographical description, but there is a deeper meaning behind. The angel is not here commissioned to speak of Gaza and its desolation, but he describes the road thither as desert compared to the populous Samaritan villages (ver. 25); desert beyond all other roads in the district. There were several ways from Jerusalem to Egypt, and this was the least used of any, the most solitary, forsaken, desert. Baumgarten rightly observes, that the description of the silent deserted road by the angel has special reference to Philip's appointed office, such a place being well suited for his undisturbed ministerial work. For to what purpose could the command to arise and to go be given to Philip but to point out to him a way of fulfilling his office? This is self-evident. Whenever the order of march is given to a soldier, it is with some reference to his special military duties. Thus the angel's words might be understood as meaning, 'Leave this Samaritan city; here thy task is ended. Go down to the desert way; it is there that thou wilt find a willing hearer who is return-

ing from worshipping at Jerusalem. A secret, *silent task* lies before thee.' This is the latent meaning of the angel's words, and the whole character of the interview with the Ethiopian is conformable thereto.

Thus how exquisitely everything harmonizes! The eunuch has chosen this solitary road, just that he may read his newly-acquired treasure, a chapter of Holy Writ, undisturbed, and the Lord sends him the very expounder and preacher that he requires. Thus the ways of God and man are made to meet together, whenever salvation has to be brought within the reach of a soul that earnestly seeks for it. Philip, if left to himself, would certainly not have set out on his journey just then, or he would in all probability have betaken himself elsewhere. But now he has his definite commission given him, and his way marked out. The rest is all clear. The moment he sees the chariot, he runs thither; without previous greeting, or preface of any kind, he has courage at once to introduce himself to the distinguished traveller in the character of a teacher. Thus, under God's special guidance, after the harvest reaped in Samaria, where Jesus himself had once sown, the first seed is silently dropped, which is to bring forth blessed fruit in Ethiopia.

## CHAPTER XI.

## THE ANGEL SENT TO CORNELIUS.

## ACTS X.

THE time had now arrived when the gospel was to be openly proclaimed to the Gentile world; no longer preached in secret to one individual convert on the desert way; but when it was to come, so far as this is ever true of the kingdom of God, "with observation."

The chosen scene was the city next in importance to Jerusalem itself, the customary residence of the governor whenever he was not in Jerusalem (xxiii. 23, 33; xxv. 1, 6, 13), a city named, as was *Cesarea Philippi*, in honour of the Roman emperor. This city was known, in contradistinction, as *Cesarea Stratonis*, *Palæstinae*, or *Palæstina*, and was situated on the Mediterranean, on the site of a fortress called *Strato's Tower*. Tacitus cursorily mentions it as the capital of *Judea*, so that we now see the gospel gradually making its way to all the chief cities of the empire, *Antioch*, *Philippi* (xvi. 13), *Athens*, *Corinth*, *Ephesus*, *Rome*. At this time, *Cesarea* was garrisoned by the Italian band or cohort, a captain (centurion) of which, as representative of the warlike, world-wide sway of Rome, was to stand at the head of the Gentile converts. For this he had been partially prepared, being certainly a proselyte of the gate (ver. 22); but, nevertheless, he was still an un-

circumcised Gentile, cut off by the severe restrictions of the Mosaic law from close fellowship with the Jewish people.

In proof of the earnest piety of this proselyte, Luke adduces some further particulars. He served the true God according to his knowledge, *with all his house*, as we may see proved in ver. 7, which tells of the beautiful spirit of confidence that existed between him and his servant. He gave much alms *to the people*, whom he recognised, even in their fallen estate, to be God's chosen people, like that other centurion of whom Luke tells us in his gospel (vii. 5), and this partly in token of submission, Roman as he was, to the God of Israel, and partly from the dictates of true benevolence. He who fears God, and seeks mercy at his hand, is sure to show mercy to his neighbours. Next, Luke gives us the clue to the centurion's excellence in the all-expressive and all-revealing fact, "*he prayed to God always.*" It might have been said of him, far more truly than of any of the Pharisees, that he abounded in works, and followed the advice given by Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. iv. 27). And yet these works, which did not as yet deserve the appellation of *good works*, like those of the female disciple Tabitha (ix. 36), did not quiet the longing of his heart for peace and forgiveness of sins (chap. x. 36-43), and therefore he continued earnest in prayer, not only at the hours appointed to the Jews, which, we may be sure, he reverently observed, but always, at all times, as it is strongly expressed. The fact of the preaching of salvation and peace through the Crucified can no more have been unknown to him than the history on which it was based. Of both alike it was true that this thing was not done in a corner (xxvi. 26), but still the message had never been addressed to him personally. He must, indeed, have been in some

measure acquainted with the prophets, and the promises contained in them, for we find Peter, in his subsequent discourse, referring to the testimony of the prophets in corroboration of his doctrine. But probably he was less intimately grounded in the Old Testament than the Ethiopian of whom we have just read. Again, whatever the inclination of his heart towards the God of Israel, he had not entirely thrown off the Roman. He was only half a Jew. The severe line of demarcation that still existed between the chosen people and the devout heathen must have perplexed him considerably, and in spite of all his religious anxiety and his prayers, we do not find that he had hitherto taken any steps towards embracing a gospel of salvation, which was destined apparently as yet for the Jews exclusively.

Such seems to us to have been the real position of Cornelius. Like the rest of the proselytes, he was better prepared to receive Christianity than the pharisaical Jews; but this was only through the preparing grace of the God of Israel, and companionship with that people "of whom," fallen as they were, "as concerning the flesh, Christ came." To such God-fearing and God-seeking men as he, the gospel had now to be offered, unincumbered by all legal rites whatsoever, previously to its final universal extension to those that were far off, even to the most idolatrous and most unrighteous among the heathen world.

Cornelius was favoured with a vision even before Peter saw his; and it is worthy of remark that the account of each of their visions is given to us three times over in the Acts, just as we have three separate narratives of the conversion of the great apostle of the Gentiles himself. God surely is the God of the Gentiles also; God's angels do not merely appear in Israel, they are ministering servants to



all who shall be heirs of salvation (Heb. i. 14). The heavenly message to Cornelius came neither in a dream by night nor in a trance, as in the case of Peter; and, indeed, there are some perfectly new features in this instance, which we ought not to overlook. At three o'clock in the day, in broad daylight, the angel appears in a vision, *evidently!* It is most probable, though not positively stated, that Cornelius having chosen this particular hour for prayer, out of reverence for the ordinances of Israel, this being the time of the evening sacrifice (iii. 1), the angel also chose this holy season for his appearance, as in the case of Daniel and Zacharias. Cornelius was fasting at the time, as he mentions in verse 30, so that the three works on which the Pharisees laid especial stress were (Matt. vi. 2, 5-16) performed by him without being tainted by the pharisaical spirit; but this third work, fasting, is named neither by Luke in his account of the centurion's character, nor in the angel's assurance of acceptance; that it may be recognised in its true character as not obligatory. It is also only from Cornelius himself that we have the account of the angel standing before him as a man in bright clothing; whereas the inspired historian begins at once by saying that it was an angel of God, and also that he was seen by the centurion *coming in to him*; while, from the 30th verse, we might almost have concluded that the vision burst upon him suddenly. Was it his guardian angel, and the bearer of his prayer? we are tempted to ask. But the Scripture does not vouchsafe any specific information on the subject; nor does the angel say, I have borne thy prayer up to God; though he certainly does imply that he was one who had certain knowledge both of the nature and frequency, as well as of the result that had attended the centurion's prayers.

In the very calling of him by his name Cornelius, the fact of his acceptance with God was in a measure implied. We know how significantly in Scripture the Lord God is wont to call those that are his by their name (Isa. xliii.) The first time that we met with this form of address from the mouth of his angels was on the occasion of the consolatory message brought to Daniel (Dan. ix. 22). Till then, the prophet had been spoken to merely as son of man (viii. 17); but afterwards still more emphatically, as "O Daniel, greatly beloved" (x. 11); and again in chap. x. 12; xii. 4, 9. Zechariah the prophet was never called by his name; but on the contrary, at the very beginning of the New Testament, Zacharias is so addressed, and so are Mary and Joseph. Philip and Peter, on the other hand, are not called by their names (Acts xii. 7). But Paul in the shipwreck is comfortingly named by the angel (xxvii. 24). From this glance at parallel passages, we at once see that the very word *Cornelius* implies, 'Fear not, be of good courage;' nay, that in it is latent what Peter afterwards declared (ver. 35), 'Thou art chosen by God, and acceptable to him.'

And yet this pious centurion, readily as he was wont to answer to his name when commanded by his superiors, or applied to by his subalterns, does naturally feel some terror when thus addressed by the *man in bright clothing*, whom he at once forebodes to be a messenger of God. But only one ready answer suggests itself to the well-disciplined soldier, "*What is it, Lord?*" *i.e.*, What are thy commands? What shall I do? as it appears from verse 6, that the angel understood the words to mean.

"*Thy prayer and thine alms are come up (risen) for a memorial before God.*"—This is spoken graciously to comfort and encourage, before the actual command is given;

and it is equivalent to saying, That which I am commissioned to bring thee is good news from God. What an assurance for a seeking and praying child of man! and how often, without any visible appearance, do angels secretly and inwardly bring such assurance home to our hearts! Indeed, we may boldly say that this very assuring us that our prayers are heard, is one of the chief offices of these ministering spirits; and this not merely in a general way—God knows, names, calls, remembers *thee*—but they give the definite comfort of an assurance that all *our* seeking and aiming after God shall be crowned with *finding*. No doubt, Cornelius must have had, ere this, reason to believe that he was heard, else he would not have continued to pray; but never had he received such bright, positive confirmation as now. *Thy prayers and thine alms*. The angel names both together, though in a different order to that in which they are mentioned by Luke (ver. 2); for here was no question of mere external acts, such as were seen of men, but of the state of the heart (manifested in conduct) before God. The fasting, as we before observed, is not alluded to; it is a mere adjunct of prayer, proving the earnestness with which it was undertaken; even the alms are only of value as prayer in action, as a proof of the zeal with which Cornelius sought to the best of his power to follow after righteousness before the Lord. That the motive of these his prayers and alms was not however the establishing his own righteousness, but the obtaining the forgiveness of sins, is evident from the apostle's discourse (ver. 43), as also from the expression made use of by him in relating the circumstances (xi. 14). The whole history affords a striking testimony to the truth of the words uttered by the man born blind to the proud Pharisees: "If any man be

a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him God heareth" (John ix. 31); or as John himself authoritatively states: "And whatsoever we ask we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (1 John iii. 22). Without humble and earnest prayer, indeed, no works can be acceptable to God, but neither can prayer without a corresponding earnestness and perseverance in good works.

In Luther's version, we have the passage a little weakened by his rendering the words in the singular, "thy prayer;" for in truth the angel sums up each sigh and each separate deed of charity in the phrase, *thy prayers and thine alms*. Both these, the alms as well as the prayers, are *come up before God*. This lofty language is used only by the ministering servant, who is now commissioned by God to answer the centurion's prayer. Cornelius indeed, himself, though he had never questioned, as the ungodly do, Does God know? is there knowledge with the Most High? or whether it was in vain for him to cleanse his heart by prayer, or to wash his hands by alms-giving (Ps. lxxiii. 11-13); yet relates with delight the positive assurance that had been given to him, somewhat differently, as, "*Thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God*" (ver. 31). These differing texts in the same chapter prove to us that we must not lay too much stress upon the mere letter; and yet we can hardly refrain from asking which of these two versions was actually used by the angel. We for our part hold that the account given by Cornelius is rather to be understood as a subjective paraphrase, an explanation, as it were, of his own; and that the more solemn expression *come up for a memorial* was really the one used by the angel. True, if we inquire in what way Luke could have known what the

angel's words really were, except directly or indirectly through Cornelius himself, the question becomes a little perplexing. But on the other hand, we might just as well ask why Luke should himself have varied the words without a reason for doing so. According to our theory, we find in this remarkable deviation a slight trace of the Spirit of inspiration by which the inquiring historian was led; and believe that when Peter (from whom Luke probably derived his information) came to question Cornelius more closely, and repeatedly to discuss the occurrence with him, as it was most natural he should, he heard from Cornelius the original words, and at once recognised them as such. Agreeably to such a supposition, all the slight variations of the angelic address may easily be explained. Compare verse 32 and chap. xi. 14.

And, indeed, in whatever way we explain these variations, we shall find that each expression deserves to be specially noted. In the words, "come up *for a memorial before God*" (as in Mal. iii. 16), we cannot fail to be struck with an allusion to Lev. ii. 2, 9, 16; Num. iv. 5, 26. This phrase comes from the lips of the angel with peculiar fitness and beauty, and intimates to the Gentile that henceforward he stands on a level with the Israelite, that his prayers are as incense before God (Ps. cxli. 2; Rev. v. 8; viii. 4), and that his alms also are a sacrifice with which God is well pleased (Heb. xiii. 15, 16).

"*And now send men to Joppa, and call (to thee) (a certain) Simon, who is surnamed Peter; he lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the sea-side.*"—*And now*; these words coming after the first clause must have prepared Cornelius to expect some special favour, and with good reason; but it was now to come in the natural order of God's kingdom on earth. The extraordinary

appearance of the angel is only to point Cornelius to the ordained apostle; just as the Lord himself, speaking in glory from heaven, directs Paul to Ananias, and the angels leave it to the shepherds of Bethlehem to make known abroad the good-tidings of the Saviour's birth. We find, indeed, angels announcing that the Lord is born, is risen, will return, but the gospel itself, the actual tidings of forgiveness of sins by faith in his name, the preaching of the Cross in short, is never intrusted to them; that office belongs to sinful men, who can speak out of their own personal faith and experience (compare ver. 26 with xiv. 15). These ambassadors, beseeching men in Christ's stead, are also angels, messengers of God (Haggai i. 14; Mal. ii. 7; iii. 1). Yea, this office is higher than that of angels. The angel speaks reverently of the apostle, before whose presence he retires after having twice emphatically referred to him as the one from whom the necessary information was to be sought and received. "*He lodgeth; he shall tell thee.*" Cornelius is to send to the city of Joppa, eight miles from Cæsarea, and call Simon, *whose surname is Peter*. This distinguishing surname, the origin and meaning of which the centurion will know hereafter, must not be omitted, Simon being a very common name, and the apostle living at that very time with a namesake, Simon the tanner. Again, the position of the house, "by the sea-side," is accurately described. And this, perhaps, not so much to insure the safety of the message which had to be sent; for in Joppa we cannot doubt that Peter, who had so recently raised the dead (ix. 36-43), was universally known, and could easily have been found; the motive was rather to give Cornelius a correct idea of the kind of man he was to send for,—'He is only a guest in Joppa, waiting for further directions, as to whither he is to carry the word

that he is appointed to preach; he will at once recognise in thy summons a higher voice than thine;—all this the angel would signify to the centurion. Yes; the dignified Roman is to receive God's word from the Galilean fisherman. No mention is made of the apostolic office of the latter; he is simply spoken of as one Simon Peter, lodging with one Simon a tanner; but yet, the man who is to speak *the word* must be summoned more respectfully and solemnly than merely by one messenger, consequently *men* are to be sent, which Cornelius rightly interprets to mean the number three, and chooses two of his household servants and a devout soldier.

It has been well observed that the centurion was not sent to the apostle, but that, on the contrary, the apostle's office was to carry the gospel from place to place. Again, Cornelius is not directed to go and join himself to Israel, or to become a convert to Judaism, but the kingdom of God through the gospel now comes to the Gentiles. Accordingly, this first typical instance required that the whole of the centurion's household, and his near friends, should hear it as well as he. No doubt Cornelius, in his zeal, would naturally have wished to go to Joppa himself; this being denied him, the same zeal makes him assemble kinsmen and friends to hear the promised good-tidings from the servant of God.

“*He will tell thee*” (will speak to thee according to his office, which is to teach and preach the word; will make known to thee) “*what thou oughtest to do.*” The whole life of the centurion is bound up in this question that he has put to the angel, “What shall I do?” (a question we heard put before, on the day of Pentecost, chap. ii. 37.) His messengers, to whom he has related everything, when they reach Joppa, express the matter a little vaguely, but

very well in their way; "*he is to hear words of thee*" (ver. 22). He himself, in his impatience both for himself and his friends, to *hear* all things that have been commanded of God to Peter, rather hurries over the angel's direction, quotes it thus: "*who, when he cometh, shall speak unto thee*" (ver. 32). But throughout we see great stress laid upon the speaking, the preached word. Later, Cornelius must either have better understood the full meaning of the words of the angel, or recalled them more precisely, and imparted them to Peter, for we find the complete sentence given (xi. 14), "*who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved.*" Here we have the same comprehensive promise which was repeated in the case of the Philippian jailer (xvi. 31), and contained in the word spoken on the day of Pentecost (ii. 39), "*you and your children,*" as well as implied in the salutation prescribed by Jesus himself (Matt. x. 12; Luke x. 5; xix. 9), ("*Peace be to this house*"), and prefigured from afar in the spiritual declaration of Joshua, "*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*"

And now the angel's message to Cornelius is over, and he "*departs from him*" in human fashion, as probably he had entered. The centurion at once prepares to obey, and gathers, as we have seen, not only his household and soldiers, to whom he had declared all these things, but also his kinsmen, and all friends like-minded with himself. The result justifies his believing confidence; the Holy Ghost comes upon all these hearers of the word, and being baptized, they constitute the Lord's first Church gathered out of the Gentile world.



## CHAPTER XII.

## THE ANGEL DELIVERING PETER.

## ACTS XII.

AT the time of the second persecution, the Churches, as they were called, had in the sight of all their adversaries firmly planted themselves throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria (ix. 13); nay, more, the Gentiles had been gathered into a considerable church at Antioch (xi. 22-27), the apostles, however, still having their head-quarters at Jerusalem. About this time (compare xii. 1 with xi. 27-30) the emperor Claudius at length gave back Judea and Samaria to Herod Agrippa (the elder), so that he now once more possessed all the power and authority of his grandfather, including the power of life and death. This prince, not inherently of a cruel disposition, had no higher aim than to make himself popular both with the Romans and the Jews (compare ver. 3 with 22, 23), and the favour with which the populace had at first regarded the Christians (v. 13, 26), having now turned to a fanatical hatred, the unhappy king thought he could do nothing so politic as to become the minister and executor of the popular feeling. Accordingly, he "*stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the Church,*" and naturally chose the more prominent characters in it, going so far as to pass sentence of death

without even the formality of a trial! With what impressive brevity Luke announces the first martyrdom among the apostles: James, the brother of John, Herod killed with the sword! for James was one of the leading three among the twelve, and was, doubtless, not unknown to the people at large. The more retiring character of John, perhaps, excited less enmity, while the powerful preacher and miracle-worker, Peter (whose very shadow healed the sick), may have inspired a salutary awe. Thus, then, James became the mark for popular hatred, was the one of the sons of thunder destined first to share the Lord's cup and baptism, as predicted by the same Lord (Matt. xx. 23); while John, on the other hand, agreeably to other words of his Master (John xxi. 22), lived longer than any of the apostles.

The pleasure shown by the Jews at the bloody deed so encouraged the king to proceed in his course that Peter was next taken; but according to the newly-established custom among the Jews, his execution was to be delayed till after Easter, was not to be hurried on as that of his Lord had been. Another opportunity was now granted to him of making good his promise (Luke xxii. 33). As he had once slipped away from prison in a miraculous manner, the Jews required that this time he should be kept safe indeed; and, accordingly, the customary watch of four men was quadrupled, one party of four probably relieving the other at stated times (ver. 6), two being always inside with the prisoner, and two before the door keeping the prison.

James was put to death, as we have seen, suddenly. Peter, on the contrary, was imprisoned during the days of unleavened bread, that his execution might afford the excitement of a public spectacle to the people. This is reason enough why we should read only in his case, and not

in that of James, of instant and earnest prayer being made without ceasing of the Church unto God for him. We do not need to suppose, like the Catholics, by way of further explanation, that Peter was of higher value, as being now the acknowledged head of the Church. We read merely that prayer was made *for him*, which implies, no doubt, petitions for the preservation of his life and further witnessing for the truth. (Refer to the prayer in chap. iv. 24-30.) *But* prayer was made; a little, yet here, significant word, implying that the murderous counsel of men had to come into collision with this strong obstacle. And yet we would not lay, as do some commentators, a quite exclusive stress upon this prayer as the turning-point in the case, for we must not overlook the fact that it was God's pre-determining counsel which excited this fervent prayer for what He intended to grant, and who ordered the whole course of events according to his will. It was just when James had succumbed to the tyrant that God's power was to be effectually displayed, as if to say, 'Hitherto shalt thou come, and not further. Peter shall not be thy victim as well!' And this was the very moment for a fresh angelic interference.

We for our part are almost convinced, from the tone of the whole narrative, that the apostle was kept in prison during all the days of unleavened bread. So long, up even to the eve of the execution perhaps, did the Lord keep silence and hold his hand. The next day Herod's sentence would have been passed and executed; but in the night the miraculous deliverance occurred. The doomed prisoner, to whom very probably the hour of his death had been announced, had no positive reason to expect a different fate from that of James; did not indeed in any way anticipate the Divine interposition on his behalf, as we may gather from

his sound sleep, and from his supposing the whole transaction to have been a dream. He slept calmly and courageously in the near prospect of martyrdom; did not watch the night through in vague and anxious suspense; but, as it would appear, quietly, perhaps joyfully, resigned himself to God's will. According to the custom of the Roman *Custodia*, with even more than the usual precautions, we find that the prisoner was bound with two chains fastened to the arms of two soldiers, one on each side of him, besides the watch set before the door, "the first and the second ward" (ver. 10). And thus he slept between his keepers, while a large portion of the Church was assembled in the house of Mary the mother of Mark, praying for him (ver. 12). But *behold* an angel of the Lord suddenly flashed into sight, and a light shined in the prison, as Peter saw in waking, and afterwards related. Very sound must his sleep have been since this light did not disturb him; so sound, indeed, that the angel had to smite him upon his side.

And now follow three separate sentences spoken by the angel, plain and natural sentences, relating only to what had to be done at once—as it is the manner of these exalted beings to speak, in the course of their faithful services rendered to man, but yet, as we generally find the case, these sentences have a deeper meaning latent in them. God's messengers to men deal in no pious prolixity, such as we often hear from each other; use no strong language regarding what is in no way extraordinary or miraculous to them. The angel does not even say, 'Behold, the Lord will not have thee die; the prayer of the Church is heard; I am sent to save thee,'—or anything of the kind. Neither is Peter to be wakened up on this occasion by the naming of his name; but by a stroke on

his side, accompanied by the most simple, and yet, in the mouth of the shining angel, the most lofty, the most encouraging command, "Rise up quickly." And at the very same moment the words exert a miraculous power, the chains fall from the prisoner's hands, so that he can move without waking his sleeping keepers. To this succeeds another command, which middle clause of the Divine message is the most significant of all, "*Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals.*" Thus we not only see how that Peter, expecting no extraordinary interposition in his favour, had calmly and comfortably prepared himself for his night's rest; but also that now that he was free, and risen up from slumber, he was to prepare for his departure in the same leisurely way. If the first words, "Rise up," contained a promise of deliverance from prison and from bonds, this was still more strongly expressed in this second command. We do not wonder to find here interpolated by the Evangelist, *and so he did.* Possibly at the moment Peter's mind took in little more than the immediate fact, that he was to arise and go out of the prison. But on looking back and reflecting upon the whole circumstances, he must have been struck by what he then saw to be an unmistakable reference to those prophetic words of his Lord by the Lake of Gennesareth, regarding his being girded and carried by others, previous to his appointed death by crucifixion (John xxi. 18, 19). The angel knew of that speech, and now by his allusion to it gives the apostle to understand that the time was not yet come when he was to glorify God by his martyrdom, that he was now free to *gird himself* for a return to the duties of his apostolic office. It is true that Peter was no longer required to remain and preach in Jerusalem, as on the occasion of his former deliverance (ver. 20),

but rather to depart and go into another place, as we learn from verse 17. Therefore, he is not to leave half apparelled, as one escaping for his life might be expected to do. No, his departure in the power of the Lord is to be calm, dignified, and orderly. He is not only to put on his sandals, but to take his cloak with him that the night air may not chill him, suddenly waked out of sleep as he has been. What a gracious condescension we have here to human infirmity; what a significant attention to the ordinary in the midst of the extraordinary; what a sense of perfect deliverance, in short, there is in this third direction, simple as the words are: "*Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me.*" Peter might well have thought, Let my garment lie there, so only I escape with life and limb. But in spite of the rapid succession of the three concise commands, the angel allows him time enough to put on all his apparel. Finally, the words "*follow me,*" though immediately referring to their present passage through guards, and bolts and bars, and doors and gates, seem to us to have a latent reference to that "*follow me,*" spoken by the Lord to his servant on the occasion before referred to (John xxi. 22). The messenger says so here, in the name of the Lord, who has commissioned him, not merely to lead the apostle out into the street, and to the house where the Church was praying for him, but to send him back with fresh zeal and energy to tread in the footsteps of his Master.

Meanwhile, the four keepers have heard and seen nothing, as verse 18 proves. This, indeed, does not surprise us; but we find that Peter himself does not at first know that his deliverance is actually accomplished by angelic intervention; and how are we to interpret this? We cannot think the observation made by some commentators,

that every celestial apparition leaves men beside themselves, is applicable to a case like this, where so much positive activity was required. But that, instead of a vision seeming real, we meet here with a reality appearing to be a mere vision of sleep to Peter, is, we think, easily explicable. We find in this very fact of its seeming unreality the strongest proof that the apostle, although once before delivered by an angel out of prison, had not, on this occasion, the slightest expectation of divine aid, but had laid himself down in perfect resignation to the doom that awaited him, since otherwise he would have kept awake to see whether the Lord would send his angel once more. Indeed, we think that Luke details the mood of the apostle with so much distinctness, in order to lead us to this conclusion. At all events, it was like *one that dreams* (Ps. cxxvi.), one who can only believe in the reality of his rescue when it is fairly accomplished, that the newly-waked apostle followed his heavenly guide (perhaps, like him, invisibly to other eyes) through the first and second doubled watch, till they reached the iron gate that led out of the prison into the city. This heavy gate opened before them of its own accord; it was not burst by an earthquake, like the gates at Philippi; it was not even visibly touched by the angel's hand; God's own liberating might being most clearly revealed at this last juncture. After the heavenly leader, and the apostle in his train, had traversed one street, silent amidst the darkness of the night (the light no longer streaming from the angel's form), his celestial guide vanishes from before Peter's eyes. Then, for the first time, the apostle is thoroughly conscious of the nature of the whole transaction, and at once bursts out into a joyous exclamation, "Now I know that the Lord has sent an angel," not merely that it was an angel, but

that he had been *sent* ; for how can Peter help looking upward from the servant to the Master? Indeed, in verse 17, we see that he overlooks the angelic instrumentality altogether. The Lord, he said, had brought him out of prison! The *hand*, or the might, of Herod is the next thought that occurs to his mind ; from that he is delivered ; but the saddest reflection to his faithful apostolic spirit, is on the expectation of the people of the Jews ; their glad expectation of his death ! Thus we discern, through this spontaneous burst of Peter, as soon as he is fully come to himself, the state of his inward feelings ; and see that he, like his Master, mourns over the sins of his enemies more than over his own misfortunes.

We will not follow the narrative any further, but merely glance, in conclusion, at the expression used by those gathered together praying in Mary's house, when they heard the voice of Peter at the door : "*It is his angel,*" said they ; it cannot be the living man, *it is his spirit* ; this must have been the meaning of this remarkable and isolated expression, which shows that the word *angel* was used amongst the community of believers in more than one sense ; and there is reason to suppose that Rev. i. 1, xxii. 6, 16, affords an illustration of this.



## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE ANGEL TO PAUL AT SEA.

## ACTS XXVII.

BEFORE we proceed to lay down indubitably, the fact that there is no record, in the Acts, of any angelic appearance or speech between chap. xii. and xxvii., which last we are about now to consider; it will be necessary to say a few words in explanation of the apostle Paul's vision related in chap. xvi. 9. For there have been commentators who think that in this singular apparition which preceded and brought about the first preaching of the Word in Europe, they detect the presence of an angel; nay, we ourselves were formerly of the opinion that the guardian spirit of Macedonia, in the attire and speech of a Macedonian representing the Macedonian people, had proffered the petition to the apostle.<sup>1</sup> But when we came to give the subject a closer consideration, this seemed not only doubtful, but positively erroneous. That the apostle should (probably not in a dream, but as an answer to his fervent prayer) have seen such a vision, is a fact to be classed in the same category with the supernaturally imparted injunctions, or (more frequently still) prohibitions, which had throughout attended his missionary career, and been, in chap. xvi. 10,

<sup>1</sup> So Grotius: "*Angelus Macedoniam curans.*"

attributed to the Holy Ghost, and in ver. 7, if the original be properly rendered, to the Spirit of Christ, with which compare again "the Lord," as the words stand in ver. 10. If, however, in spite of these passages, we were still intended to receive the impression of a speaking angel, it would be difficult to explain the use of so perfectly unusual a form of speech as we here find, the vision being mentioned as though it had only a subjective reality—*there appeared to him a vision*. This sounds perfectly unlike chap. ix. 10; x. 10, 13; xviii. 9, and is much more in keeping with chap. ix. 12. Just as, there, Saul has a vision granted him of the very man, Ananias, who afterwards really came to him; so here we have a visionary representation of the figure and voice of a certain Macedonian, and we may reasonably enough conclude that at a later period Paul actually did see this very man also in the flesh, and recognised him. But leaving such speculations, the man was speaking as the representative of many; either of the whole of his people, or, at all events, of those among them who desired help and the knowledge of salvation, when he said, "*Help us.*" Now, this expression alone is sufficient to show that even if there were any angelic agency in the case, the angel here did not speak as an angel, and, therefore, the words have no place in our book. Angels need and require no help from men; and if we were to suppose that the speaker in the vision was preaching the gospel in Macedonia, and asked the apostle's co-operation, that would still less support the theory of an angelic appearance, for angels do not preach the gospel. But we turn from this obscure subject to dwell upon the last actual address of an angel to man, recorded for us in New Testament history.

Luke narrates the apostle Paul's voyage to Rome

(chaps. xxvii. and xxviii.) with a circumstantiality amounting even to minuteness of detail, which is unparalleled in the scriptures of the New Testament, and which only the history of Joseph, and certain portions of the life of David, are at all akin to in the Old. This is accounted for by the fact of this voyage being most important as a historical event, to say nothing of its evident and instructive spiritual, we might almost say its allegorical character. For, although the sacred historian appears, at first sight, to be simply narrating, in a quite human way, that which he had himself experienced, the Holy Spirit was in reality so overruling his choice both of incidents and expressions, that to discerning eyes the whole story appears to be an almost transparent representation of the Christian's voyage across the sea of this earthly life. Danger, discomfort, opposition from without, and yet the servant of God collected and calm, while wisely dealing with earthly events, in full confidence of faith, both as to means and end; the whole being overruled so as to fulfil God's promises and purposes concerning him. Paul's journey may be very profitably spiritualized thus, and, indeed, often has been. And we may also remark that, according to the wondrous scheme by which the whole of Scripture is connected, and each part calculated to illustrate some other, this narrative of Paul's shipwreck is a striking and significant contrast to that of Jonah's stormy voyage, a contrast well worthy of the reader's further attention.

There was fear and anguish, distress and confusion, utter hopelessness of life in the hearts of all on board, crew and passengers alike (for even Luke numbers himself among the despairing, ver. 20). Paul alone could stand firm upon the reeling ship, had light and good cheer in the darkness, strength to come forward as comforter, coun-

sellor, deliverer. With him, too, flesh and blood would have given way, had not his God made known to him, by an angelic messenger, what the event was to be, which he is now about to announce. He begins in ver. 21 with all humility, but with exquisite wisdom and discretion, to put himself forward, in a favourable light, to the worn-out and hungry men around him, so that they might be disposed to believe his words, and be strengthened by them.

“*Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me.*”—It is thus he addresses the men who had despised his counsel, and brought his life into danger by their perverseness. Now, in their time of need he may well assume this dignified tone, he, hitherto the despised prisoner, one of several prisoners who were malefactors as well; he, accused before the council of his people, as one worthy of death! Having thus reminded them of the correctness of his previous judgment, in order to predispose them to receive what further he might have to say, he goes on to express a hope, a bold one under such circumstances; nay, more than a hope, a perfect confidence, as though he were conversant with the decrees of destiny: “*There shall be no loss of any man’s life among you, but only of the ship.*” What, then, is the ship, helplessly driven by the waves, to sink before their eyes, and yet are they to be saved? This seeming impossibility is now confirmed by an impressive word, as it stands here: *For*, a word that ushers in the account of the revelation, on the strength of which Paul speaks,—“*For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve.*” How different to this the extorted confession of the prophet Jonah, flying rebelliously from the behest of his God: “*I am an Hebrew, and I fear the Lord the God of heaven, who has made the sea and the dry land*” (Jonah i. 9). On the other hand, however, we

may observe that the heathen mariners, when the mighty tempest broke on them during their way to Tarshish, did after their fashion evince some religious sense, did cry every man unto his god; here we read of nothing of the sort. Glorious the trust and reliance of the apostle amidst the horrors of the storm! "*My God, whose I am, whom I serve!*" Thus in the presence of Jewish and Gentile sailors both, he gives praise and honour to the only true God, of whom he goes on to speak (ver. 25) in all simplicity, as the God whose creatures, whose property, those who heard him were, as well as he, though, alas! they did not serve him. He proclaims that this living God, the God of Israel, is able to deliver those who serve him from every danger (Dan. vi. 16, 20), and appeals to coming events in confirmation of his words. He also gives them to understand the true nature of his office, for the faithful discharge of which he is now a prisoner in bonds; tacitly appeals to their acquaintance with his open avowal of his religion throughout the voyage. He does not shrink from speaking to the Gentiles, however incredulous they may be, of the angelic beings well known in Jewish theology, of those heavenly servants of the Lord of heaven and earth, one of whom had that very night spoken with him, Paul,—their prisoner, standing before them now with all boldness, in the midst of the darkness and the storm.

This angel had said, "*Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Cæsar; and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee.*"—It is even thus from the beginning to the end of holy writ; from Gen. xv. 1, to Rev. i. 17; xi. 10; we have these gracious words, "*Fear not,*" spoken by the Lord himself to his people; spoken, too, so readily by holy angels in his name. In Corinth (Acts xviii. 9), the Lord spoke thus to Paul; in Jerusalem

(chap. xxiii. 11), the same meaning is conveyed still more gently. Here, on the stormy sea, the words of comfort sound from angelic lips—because on this occasion the appearance of the heavenly servant was all that was needed by him who, on other occasions, had had immediate communications from the Lord himself—and sound out definite and strong, because in the apostle flesh and blood had really been alarmed, not, of course, with the abject fear of the heathen, and probably in a less degree than the rest of his Christian companions. And this he publicly avows, both that no one may think of him more highly than he deserves, and also by this very avowal to bring himself into closer fellowship with the men whom he is desirous to comfort. It is as if he had said, I also am a man! But he is a man for whom God has work to do, with which no storm must interfere. The sailors, for whom the message of the angel was as important as for the apostle himself, must have learnt from it, not only that the prisoner was one who, in his conscious innocence of any crime, had appealed to the highest of all earthly tribunals; but also that he was one who had a lofty part to play before the imperial throne. And to the apostle himself these words must have been a most impressive confirmation of his being in the way of God's appointment. His words in chap. xxv. 10, 11, spoken under strong pressure, and at a decisive moment, were only a sudden recognition of the way opened out to the goal which he had, in chap. xix. 21, proposed to his zeal; and that bold declaration of his, *I must also see Rome*, had already received the seal of God's approbation in chap. xxiii. 11: "*Thou must also bear witness at Rome.*" All this and more; his very first calling; the first question and answer between him and the Lord: "What wilt thou have me to do?" "It shall be told thee

what thou must do ;"—must have been recalled to his mind by this, probably the last supernatural intimation of things to come, vouchsafed to Paul. And so for attentive readers of holy writ, these words throw a prophetic light over the close of the Acts of the Apostles.

"*Thou must stand before Cæsar !*"—These are humble-sounding words, compared to those once spoken to the steersman of his ship, by one in like peril of shipwreck : "Remember that thou bearest Cæsar and his fortunes !" But if we consider them closely, how incomparably more sublime they seem, taken in connexion with what follows. The lives of all on board are linked with the life of this servant of God, and saved for his sake ! He who, in the dignity of his conscious innocence, had said, when standing before the Governor : "If I be an offender, or have committed anything worthy of death, I refuse not to die ; but if there be none of these things whereof these accuse me, no man may deliver (*give*) me unto them" (xxv. 11), is the same to whom the deliverance of these two hundred and seventy-five trembling souls (ver. 37), is now to be *given*. In the original, the word is the same on both occasions, and no doubt the apostle must have been struck with this coincidence.

The angel about to announce this marvellous gift to be made to Paul, prefaces it by the usual word in all such cases, "Behold," or "Lo !" The heathen are to remark the infinite love and pity for all poor children of men—yea, even for those who know him not—of the God of Paul. They shall understand how this Paul has borne them, even *them*, in his heart ; has prayed for them—prayed for their deliverance ; for this was a conclusion they could not fail to draw. Paul would never have cared simply to save his own life, while sinners were swept to de-

struction before his eyes. He had prayed for himself and for all on board; and consequently the angel has brought him the assurance of his prayer being accepted, and announced to him, with a sublime certainty, such as became one conversant with, and appointed to carry out, the counsel of the Highest: "*God has given thee all.*"—To thee, the apostle, and with what purpose? Evidently, 'that thou mightest preach to them when they are once convinced of the divine nature of thy mission.' We may, therefore, assume that many were not only saved from present death, but that their souls, too, were given to the apostle to be converted and saved. At all events, Luke in ver. 44 narrates the escape of all, as well as that of himself and Aristarchus, as the immediate consequence of the promise, and we may infer that the divine purpose here, as in every case of temporal deliverance, had a further reference to eternal life.

The speech of the angel is thus calculated, as we have already seen, not only to comfort Paul, but to serve as encouragement to the whole ship's crew, and to fix their reverent attention on the honoured servant of God from whose lips it was transmitted to them. And, accordingly, its last words emphatically honour this man ordained to stand before Cæsar, this man whose nautical counsels they had indeed despised, yet who was now ready again to give them counsel whereby not only their lives but their souls might be saved;—those on board are spoken of as, "*All who sail with thee.*" In God's sight Paul is the captain and steersman of the vessel; all the others are mere subordinates, only sail *with him*. Thus pious souls are ever the support, the pillars of the world, for the sake of whom alone it is spared and preserved. Again, spiritual and temporal deliverance both, are invariably linked with human will



and human obedience. God's purpose is never an unconditional one. If the sailors, instead of listening obediently to their real captain, Paul the prisoner, are determined wilfully to let down the boat and flee out of the ship, despite the *gift* of which we read in ver. 31, they cannot be saved. The murderous purpose of the soldiers (ver. 42), appears only to have been prevented by the centurion's well-grounded unwillingness to injure Paul.

It is in perfect accordance with this state of things that Paul, in ver. 25, should be of good cheer himself, and exhort the rest to be so too, expressing thus his own confident expectation, 'I believe God that it shall be *even as it was told me.*' And, in order that those who heard him should be able to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the predicted fate of the ship and of the men, he adds, "*Howbeit we must be cast upon a certain island.*" Some have read these words as a prophecy of the apostle's, but to us it seems that he accounts for this knowledge of his by the words "*even as it was told me,*" and that the mention of this method of deliverance had formed part of the angelic communication.

Let us also, although nothing special have been predicted to us, be constant in our comfortable faith in our God. Without an angel's message to tell us so, let us feel assured that on the stormy sea of this world nothing, whether in life or death, can happen to us but what is according to God's purpose, and revealed in its general features in God's Word. This will be enough to enable us not only to be free from fear ourselves, but to comfort others, with the comfort wherewith we are comforted of God.



PART II.



THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN.



## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE PRAISE OF THE FOUR LIVING CREATURES.

## REVELATION IV.

WE have already, in a former work, given our reasons for believing that the voice spoken of in the first verse of this chapter is not that of an angel, but of the Lord himself. To the Seer of Patmos, who is henceforth *in the Spirit* in a still higher degree than that referred to (i. 10), the Lord is about to vouchsafe wonderful and mysterious visions of Deity, such as Ezekiel in his days, heaven being in like manner opened to him, had been permitted to behold; and we shall find that the symbolism of these later visions both repeats and completes that manifested to Ezekiel and to Daniel also. This fourth chapter may be considered as, strictly speaking, the beginning of the Apocalypse or Revelation, after the introductory epistles to the seven churches have been dictated by the Lord in person. We are now entering upon a spiritual domain where the profoundest and humblest caution is requisite, and where most commentators have erred by too positive explanations of mysterious images. Our part being only to expound the voices and words of angels, we do not purpose to write any commentary upon the Apoca-

lypse as a whole; we aim only at expounding so much of the context as may be absolutely necessary to a right understanding of the passages that lie within our especial province.

The throne shown to John, and the one that sat in glory on that throne, are essentially the same that Ezekiel saw, and described in the first and tenth chapters; but yet we have here—how should we not?—a New Testament element introduced,—we discern more distinctly the *new* creation in redeemed humanity. If that which Ezekiel saw (i. 28), and which we also find alluded to in Isaiah. lv. 9, 10, and Ps. lxxxix. 37, was the rainbow, the sign of the covenant of grace, round about the throne of glory, we can still less doubt that we have the same image presented to us here, although the lovely emerald-green now predominates over all other colours, or even absorbs them. And it is in strict accordance with this original symbol of grace, that here, in the New Testament, the throne should appear surrounded by *men* sitting upon seats or thrones with crowns on their heads, whom Ezekiel did not see, but who are now introduced before the living creatures (comp. xix. 4). These *elders*, or *ancients*, in the council of heaven, once named by Isaiah in a moment of prophetic inspiration (xxiv. 23), represent by a symbolic number the Church, or ransomed humanity, and their white garments evidently refer to iii. 4, 5, 18. The lightnings, thunderings, and voices that proceed out of the throne, are the revelations and the judgments of the power of God. The Holy Spirit is represented in his manifold offices by the seven lamps (compare i. 4, 5, 6, and Zech. iv. 10). The sea of glass like unto crystal is a very comprehensive symbol, about the various meanings of which there has been a great deal of needless controversy. In Ezekiel i. 22, it appeared as

an arch of crystal overhead ; here it is significantly represented as a solid, steadfast, transparent ocean : as it were the glorified (red) sea of tribulation, on whose happy shores the ransomed may sing Moses' song of deliverance as a new song, the song of the Lamb also (xv. 2, 3) ; and it also recalls the sea of brass in the temple, that replaced the lavers of brass in the tabernacle, in which the priests of God were to wash ; while in its crystal clearness heaven is now mirrored, the sea of tribulation overpast, the cleansing waters, needed no longer, being changed into beauty and brightness. The image is a more complex one than that in Ezekiel, though it has much in common with it.

Amidst the many added or further developed symbols, towards the expounding of which we would in all humility offer some suggestions, we may specially instance the *living creatures*, whom we met with in Ezekiel, and now find again here, in close connexion with the elders, or representatives of humanity. These living creatures are one with the cherubim. They have the same human form, though not human faces ; they have human gestures ; they fall down (v. 8) ; they use their hands (xv. 7, compared with Ezek. i. 5, 6, 8) ; they are, in the same way, full of eyes (Ezek. x. 12) ; they are intimately and inextricably united with the forces of nature, and, at the same time, they have a conscious personality, and are invariably subordinated to the angels. In chap. xv. 7 we find them ministering to the angels having the seven plagues. It may, indeed, be in a measure true that they represent the elementary forces and forms of spiritual and material nature, so to speak, the creative energies of God (in verse 11 of the chapter we are now considering, we have an especial reference to all created things) ; but, on the other hand, these *beasts*, or *living ones*, speak just as the cherubim do in Ezekiel,

and must, under this symbolic appearance, be understood as personal beings, having an actual existence.

*What* they say, and speak, and cry is not described by the seer, as being merely said once, or even repeated over and over again ; but in his state of rapture he was miraculously enabled, in some manner of which we can have no conception, to be made aware of eternal duration, eternal continuance in the heaven opened to his gaze, and in the song around the throne of God. "*They rest not day and night.*"—This is equivalent to saying, in our human language, *There is no night there* ; no need of the alternation of a season of rest. We poor children of men, whose mortal bodies are doomed to the fatigue of waking hours and the inaction of sleep, may well sigh and yearn to enter into *that* rest, that blessed unrest of ceaseless adoration. How that wondrous song sounds in the language of angels and redeemed spirits, no human being in our present state can properly express. Even the Spirit of the Lord could only convey some approximation to John by means of the time-consecrated phrase man owes to the condescending revelation of God. It is the same "Holy, holy, holy," which the prophet Isaiah had heard from the seraphim, which is now employed by the cherubim: "*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God the Almighty, he who was, and he who is, and he who is to come.*" Here, as in Isaiah vi. and Psalm xcix. 3, 5, 9, we have the doctrine of the Trinity very clearly referred to. *The Lord* is evidently the translation of "Jehovah," and the added expression, *God the Almighty*, is generally used in the Septuagint for "the Lord (the God) of Sabaoth" or "of hosts." But in order to shed a fuller, a New Testament light upon the name, we have in addition the etymological restitution of the Hebrew Jehovah, in the three tenses of



the eternal self-existence. And although, in chap. i. 8, the same words are with perfect fitness used in speaking of the eternal Son—*he who cometh to judgment*—yet in the passage we are now considering, we must consider this adoration of the Trinity as more immediately addressed to the Father, since, in the fifth chapter, the Lamb is first introduced as appearing before him who sitteth on the throne; as in Dan. vii. the Son of man had been brought before the Ancient of Days (comp. Rev. vii. 10). Indeed, the fourth and fifth chapters of the Apocalypse, as first and second parts, form together a special introduction to the visions that follow, of God and the Lamb. We may further remark, that the added clause in Isaiah, “The whole earth is full of thy glory,” which the seraphim proclaimed, is not given here by the cherubim, because it is to be kept back till the further fulfilment John is to witness (xi. 15-18; xii. 10).

That which follows in the narrative of John (ver. 9), the “glory, honour, and thanks” of the living creatures, refers to no new ascription of praise by them, but manifestly only points to the one before given in ver. 8. And we read that *when* they thus give thanks, the elders fall down. In this harmony of praise rendered by the angel-world and by humanity before the eternal throne, there is, nevertheless, one very significant difference, which Von Gerlach educes from the simple, and, alas! easily overlooked letter of the sacred text—“The four living creatures (or beasts) turn from God, the elders turn to God, and say, Lord, thou art worthy.” The primitive creation still manifests God’s glory and speaks to man, but man is God’s restored image; and while he gazes upon the divine glory in creation, he reflects the radiance that beams upon him, and speaks to God in his

praise, "Yea, verily, cherubim and seraphim hide their faces, redeemed sinners *behold with open face the glory of the Lord*" (see 2 Cor. iii. 18). We shall find the same instanced in chap. xi. 17, as well as chap. v. 9. This latter chapter (ver. 9, 10) describes the praise given in the *new song* to the Lamb for the redemption wrought by him, and we must be careful to observe, what has been often overlooked, that there the living creatures do not sing and give praise with the elders. No; the words *thou hast redeemed us* belong exclusively to those redeemed out of mankind, though the four beasts also fall down before the Lamb. This is the reason why here, and here only, the usual order is reversed, and the beasts are mentioned first. The angels give praise *together with us* for our redemption, yea, even the cherubim of nature sing the Holy, holy, holy of the kingdom of grace; but *men* lead that strain, while in chap. iv. 11, we have man joining with the angels to sing the praise of the *Creator*, for the everlasting gospel itself is intended to re-proclaim the glory of him who created all things (xiv. 6, 7). Praise for our redemption leads us back to praise for creation, and includes praise for our preservation as well, as we have before said elsewhere; and here we have an instance of this, since we find the *new creature*, together with *all* God's praise-giving creatures (v. 13), praising with one accord at once the Creator and the Redeemer.

## CHAPTER XV.

## WHO IS WORTHY TO OPEN THE BOOK?

## REVELATION V.

THE remarks we have already made, concerning angels and men, in commenting on chap. iv., apply very closely to the following chapter also. An angel proclaims aloud the question, but one of the elders replies in the name of humanity; it is these elders alone who sing the *new song!* Thus, in ver. 12, the angels join in their degree; in ver. 13, *every creature* has part; afterwards, in ver. 14, the four beasts say a mighty Amen; but the last, the deepest worship is that of the elders. Such is the alternate song of heaven and earth to the glory of the Lamb. He who knows that *Lamb slain* by living faith, and has been redeemed by his blood, will understand the sweet inmost meaning of this without much interpretation, will not venture to doubt the divine truth, nor to resist the heavenly authority with which John here speaks; no, he, too, will fall down and join in the elders' worship. They who, on the contrary, do not possess this key to the right understanding of the marvellous words, will more or less be offended at them, and will never attain to their full meaning, be their erudition or their science what it may.

The book which the seer beholds in the right hand of him that sitteth on the throne, carries us back once more to the visions of the prophet Ezekiel. There, too, we read of the roll of a book likewise held in a hand (ii. 10), which contained the substance of his prophecies. It is true that Rev. x. first offers the full, the exact counterpart of that vision, but, nevertheless, the first book described in chap. v. also contains a sublime explanatory reference to it. This we trace in the very first descriptive details given, the book in the present case being, as well as that Ezekiel saw, written within and on the back side. This scroll (Rev. vi. 14), rolled round a stick after the manner of antiquity, appeared (a thing quite unusual) to be written on both sides, and was sealed with seven seals. We can easily figure to ourselves its outward semblance, but the important point is to attain to a right view of the meaning and nature of this book with its sealed scrolls. In its primary sense, we believe it to be the book of the Future, which is mercifully hidden from us men. Thus in Ps. cxxxix. 16, we read of a book of God, in which whatever related to the future condition of each individual human being was entered; and also in Dan. xii. 1, as well as in x. 21 of the same prophet, we have mention made of the *scripture of truth*, which is undoubtedly the record of future events. This, however, agrees still more closely with the tenth chapter of Revelation, where we read, in ver. 7, of the *mystery of God declared to his servants the prophets*. This book of God in the right hand of him who sat on the throne, the book of the future, or *the sealed up among his treasures* (Deut. xxxii. 34), was indeed already in some measure known on earth as the book of prophecy. Therefore Schmieder is correct in referring here to Jesus as the expounder, or opener out of the prophecies: "Who could

be better fitted than he to interpret the dark prophecies of the early ages, which are, indeed, nothing else than single leaves out of the great world-book, the book of the future?" But there is more still contained in the symbol, and we should be very wrong to content ourselves with this primary interpretation of it. Therefore, pointing out the analogy which it has with Isa. xxix. 11, 12, and Dan. xii. 9, we go on to observe that this sealed book, in order to the lofty, profound, comprehensive meaning John intends it to convey, must further stand as the *book of universal history*, as well as of the whole series of events in which God's purposes are first hidden, then manifested—the book of destiny, dark, indeed, to the blind eyes of the children of men; nay, baffling the brighter eyes of angels also. Truly, there is written therein, as Ezekiel tells us, mourning, lamentation, and woe for God-estranged creatures, with their seeming confused and unintelligible ways. Who shall solve the riddles of this book for us; who can still the lamentation of the woes it contains?—the equally bitter lamentations of the fruitless search after the plan, the meaning, and purpose of the whole. Who but He who has made known to us the eternal counsel of the eternal love of the Father?

If it be going somewhat too far to say that "but for Christ the idea of a universal scheme (according to which the whole of history appears as the progressive work towards a definite aim of the Lord of Fate and Ruler of the world) would have been unknown among men," since this were to overlook the Old Testament; yet, on the other hand, it is certainly true that the Old Testament itself without Christ would be an unfinished sketch, an unsolved problem. Just as the external creation, together with its history, appears a defective and illegible book, without the aid of the re-

vealed Word, so this revealed word itself is only fulfilled and explained by the salvation brought about by the Incarnation. And finally, we would point out, that the opening of this sealed book not only implies foreknowing and understanding, not merely that "Christ holds the fate of the world in his hand," as Tholuck preaches on this text, but this book is also the book of Providence; it includes the execution of God's counsel, the solving all difficulties, the reducing to order of all confusion; the actual breaking the seals, in the sense of that last word, from the throne, when the Lamb is seated there, "*Behold I make all things new*" (xxi. 5). *Facta loquuntur*. The opening of this book is the triumph of a conqueror who has already conquered, and who still goes forth conquering and to conquer (vi. 2). Throughout the whole of history, up to its close, one seal after the other will be opened, the mystery contained beneath them all being the mighty work of the redemption and restoration of the lost. It is this alone that can unravel all confusion, clear away all darkness, reveal the hidden and eternal purpose that has run throughout the ages. It is to all this that the question of the angel refers when he demands who is capable (because *worthy*) to open this book. And thus we are taught that the history of humanity, written on the outer side of the scroll, is to be gradually explained by the writing on the inner side. For we cannot possibly suppose that the book was only written on both sides merely because of the amount of writing, the over-abundance of its contents. God had no need to use his materials so sparingly; and, moreover, both in Ezekiel and here we find a difference, an opposition verbally implied, between the nature of the writing within (on the face of the document) and without (on the back side). As it has been well and simply expressed, "The *causes* of the

external events of history lie in the writing within the book."

It was necessary that we should thus narrowly scrutinize the nature of this book with the seven seals, in order to be prepared for the proper understanding of the angel's proclamation. The book being plainly visible in the right hand of him who sat on the throne, this question amounted to an open challenge,—was equivalent to saying, If there be any present capable of opening this book, let him appear. Thus the angel gives expression to God's unspoken will. We may observe that John is now said to have *seen* his proclamation, as we have often read of visions being heard. And we are also familiar with questions such as these, put by the angels, merely to wake a response. The angel here mentioned is a *strong* angel, as in chaps. xi., xviii. 21, that with a loud and mighty voice he may cry throughout all heights and depths of the universe. And yet no strength of his may avail to open the book: in the work of redemption, patience takes precedence of strength. It is in the tried and enduring patience of obedience, that omnipotence must find grounds for reconciliation. "*Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?*" Most significant the testimony borne in these words! With God the question is ever, Who is worthy? With him everything is ordered according to the holiest laws of justice. The emphatic significance of this question about *worthiness* includes the whole scriptural doctrine of the close connexion between Christ's person and work (too often, alas! forgotten in our theology), upon which we cannot insist further at present. We would simply point out that the answer speaks of the *prevailing of the Lion of the tribe of Judah*, to do that which we shall see performed by the Lamb. This reminds us that certainly the angel did

not proclaim this question as one who was himself ignorant of who this *prevailer* would be found to be. For we find, in 1 Pet. i. 12, that it is a joy to angels (the cherubim ever remain before the mercy-seat) to look into the mysteries of grace.

John weeps : weeps even though he has been caught up into heaven (iv. 1), because the mighty proclaiming is followed (ver. 3) by the silence, the utter silence of all creatures in earth and in heaven, and thus his yearning desire for further knowledge seems about to be frustrated. But now comes the answer from the mouth of one of the elders, truly one of the sublimest passages this in holy writ! It is finished, it is done! Thus witness the redeemed of earth, in heaven itself, nearest to the throne! *Weep not, behold, yea, behold, that which stands before thee. He has prevailed* (overcome); here we have the first significant utterance of the actual Apocalypse linking itself impressively with the close of the introductory epistles, *as I also have overcome* (iii. 21). We know that on the banner of the tribe of Judah the lion was to be seen (Gen. xlix.) This is the lion who has risen up in his might; the rod out of the stem of Jesse (Isa. xi. 1, 10; liii. 2), which has sprouted and grown up even to the throne of God. Jesus had shortly before revealed himself in glorious majesty on earth (i. 13); in heaven he shows himself as a Lamb *as it had been slain*, but who lives and reigns with God. This is another form of expression for the fact before conveyed : "I am he who was dead; and, behold, I live." In the humiliation of his conflict unto death, the holy decrees of God's will were not entirely unfolded to him, the times and seasons of the kingdom that was to succeed his season of suffering were hidden from him. But now that the Father has given to



the glorified Son all power in heaven and earth, the book with seven seals is delivered to him also. This signifies that he takes in his own right, and receives as a gift from the Father, the book whose seals he through his victory has already unloosed. And now there sounds out before the throne of God and the Lamb (xxii. 1) the eternally new song of the redeemed, with whom also the cherubim fall down; yea, each brings his own harp, and sings his own special song of praise. Ay, and each too sees his own name, and his everlastingly happy destiny, written in the opened book. We cannot fail to observe how fully our interpretation of the elders, as the representatives of the whole of redeemed humanity, is borne out by the expressions in ver. 9, 10, especially in the original, where, in ver. 10, the *we* passes into the third person, the passage running thus, "*and hast made THEM (all with us, and like us) unto our God kings and priests; and they shall reign on the earth.*" Thus the four-and-twenty lose their personality, being merged, as it were, in the great multitude of redeemed souls out of every kindred and every tongue.

## CHAPTER XVI.

THE PRAISE OF MANY ANGELS, AND THE AMEN OF  
THE FOUR LIVING CREATURES.

## REVELATION V.

IN verse 11 of this chapter we have not the expression "*all the angels*," as in chap. vii. 11, but merely *many* angels, although the number of the living creatures still significantly remains the same. There is, indeed, some quite mysterious peculiarity about these *living ones*, since they alone stand between the throne and the elders, and then come, let this be especially noted, all the other angels. That the number of these last given here, as in Dan. vii. 9, 10, represents *the innumerable*, or, at all events, numbers far transcending human calculation, we for our part willingly believe. The passage in chap. ix. 16, with its definite duplication, differs from the indefinite plural used here, and thus we are taught not even to attempt to reckon these countless hosts. Again, we are not told why *all the angels* do not give praise and worship here as well as in chap. vii. 11, although *all creatures* are mentioned as so doing. It is as though the seer gave us, in this first passage, the first impression he received of the multitude; it was so great that he in his language could only describe it first by the large number, ten times ten thousand, and then by indefinite thousands; in chap. vii. his more posi-

tive expression is intended to convey the assemblage of the *whole* hosts of heaven.

“*Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.*”—Here, as before, it is evident that the angels comparatively worship from afar, do not address the Deity as do the redeemed of Adam’s race. They have, indeed, their own share; it is not only by sympathy with us that they claim their portion in the blessings of salvation (see Eph. i. 10; Col. i. 20), but they have not the same near and immediate right of access behind the veil as we. Wherever the creature gives, or, in other words, acknowledges the glory of the Lord its God, He is proclaimed worthy to receive that which in fact inherently belongs to Him; we find this significant expression throughout Scripture (especially in Ps. xxix. 1, 2; lxvii. 35; 1 Chron. xxii. 28). For since created beings have no other words to employ but such as they derive from themselves, their attributes and their possessions, they must needs give back to their Creator, in the form of thanksgiving and praise, what he has given to them, just as, in Rev. iv., the elders cast down their crowns before the throne of him who is King of all. In the same way all the strength, the riches, the treasures of every kind, all the wisdom, etc., that exist in the world, all spring from him, all revert to him, all belong to him. Everywhere in such heartfelt praise as God will accept, we find the same fulness of language that we have eminently here. The doxology in 1 Chron. xxx. 11 contains five words; in Rev. iv. 11, all possible ascriptions of praise are included under a threefold heading; here, in this fifth chapter, we have the mystic number seven, as in the case of the lamps, the seals, the horns, the eyes; and in ch. vii. 12, we find the same number repeated in blessing God that is

here used in blessing the Lamb. We will not attempt any closer analysis of each separate word; this has been often attempted, but never with success.

And now *every creature*—not merely that which has breath or spirit, but even the inorganic creation (see Ps. cxlviii.), each after its kind, and by its own actual service (its fulfilling God's purpose)—joins in proclaiming the glory of the Lamb, the divine majesty of the Conqueror. The division into three of the whole range of created existences, which we find in Phil. ii. 10, as well as here in ver. 1 and ver. 3, may be traced back to the beginning of Holy Writ, and appears first on the tables of the law (Exod. xx. 4). There in its original position we at once discern that the *water under the earth* has the same significance as these words, added in Revelation, "*and such as are in the sea;*" and that these latter in no way imply an additional division, a different order of existence, but that the sea, as being a visible contrast to the habitable earth, is used as an illustration for the depths of the underworld. It is true that the whole of creation ascribes a *fourfold* praise, but this, as not being *especially* the utterance of angels, does not come within our province.

And now to the praise of the whole creation is added the Amen of the four living creatures. What a celestial liturgy we have here! How striking and simple the adoption of the long-consecrated form of worship among the Jewish people (as now of the Christian Church), in order to enable us more clearly to conceive of the glorious reality. The most exalted servants of the heavenly kingdom, add their Amen to the hymn of the redeemed and of the restored creation, as if congratulating them on their perfect joy. Can anything be more sublime than this Amen? Yes, one thing, the *silent* worship that succeeds, of the four-and-

twenty elders, representatives of that ransomed humanity which has a fuller portion in this joy than even cherubim or seraphim, a worship that recalls the words written in Psalm lxxv. 1, concerning the earthly Zion, "*Praise is silent for thee.*" With this silence of the prostrated and adoring elders the chapter concludes, the genuine text running thus, "*And the elders fell down and worshipped ;*" in profoundest silence worshipped God and the Lamb with their own special worship, as before, in chapter iv. 10, 11, they had joined with the angels in praising the Creator. What an exquisite order we find everywhere observed in this book! What an oratorio this fifth chapter would afford, with its angelic proclamation and its human tears, its comforting *Behold*, and its triumphant song, its solemn Amen echoing on throughout the still more solemn silence. But who could worthily set it to music? Better, too, it should not be so set, for then it might be desecrated by profane singers; better, far, that it should remain as it is, a subject for earthly aspiration and heavenly performance.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## THE FOURFOLD CALL—COME AND SEE.

## REVELATION VI.

THE contents of the sealed book appear at its opening in the form of successive visions, passing before John's eyes as prophetic pictures of things to come, representations acted. The seven seals, opened one after the other by the Lamb, are divided, as is often the case with this mystic number, into four and three. It has been almost universally and very properly remarked, that these four first seals deal with visible events passing upon the earth; the three last relate to the region of the invisible world, pointing to the worship of sainted spirits, the judgment of sinners, and the service of angels in heaven.

The rider upon the white horse (foreshadowing chap. xiv. 14; xix. 11), we, with many other commentators, hold to be Christ, who very significantly himself appears as the first seal. The riders generally, and their horses, seem to be modelled upon those in Zech. i., vi., yet not to have any special resemblance of meaning. The conqueror on the white horse stands out in beautiful contrast to the second, third, and fourth, *e.g.*, war, famine, and pestilence, which not only succeed but spring from one another. Further, He who is their leader and ruler in all, in chap. v., has already

been named the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and accordingly he is appropriately ushered in by the thunder-tones of the first cherub,—“the first beast like a lion.” He is already crowned with the crown of triumph of his former overcoming, and yet he slowly and progressively carries out this victory. This is the plan upon which the whole Apocalypse is constructed. This, its first part, which we are now considering, does not foretell certain isolated and definite historical events; rather it delineates a course of history during which such general events will be frequently repeated. The seals, according to Von Meyer, “prefigure the general tenor of events during the centuries of the Christian era; the good and evil that awaits Christendom, and has to be gradually evolved, in order that they who wait for the glorious close of the dispensation, may not expect it too soon, and be so disappointed, and make shipwreck of their faith.” And since Christ precedes, nay, as conquering warrior is himself included in the number of the seals, and especially belongs to the first four, we are not justified, by the connexion in which this image appears, in explaining it as the spiritual triumph of the word of truth (Ps. xlv. 4-6), or even more especially the first success of the apostolic preaching. Rather we find it prefigured and certified that all the succeeding plagues—all war, all human conquests and triumphs whatsoever (as for example, those of Trajan in the first instance, but also all others to come to pass throughout the course of history)—only subserve His triumphs who is the one true warrior and conqueror, in and through all.

Now, then, we shall be able, without further exposition of the words, simple in themselves, to understand the meaning of the fourfold call of the four living creatures. In our Bibles, we have in all four passages the very same

words used, "*Come and see.*" But there are various readings of the original, and the latest criticism gives simply the word *come* in all the verses alike, whereas other authorities would read it in this abbreviated form only with regard to the second seal, while others, again, would do so in connexion with the three last seals. But, at all events, the meaning remains much the same. We hold that the first call is decidedly *Come and see*, and the last only repetitions, perhaps abbreviated repetitions of the complete sentence. In chap. iv. 1, the first voice had already called, in the name of all the rest, *Come*; and since now we have another, a separate summons, it can only imply a coming nearer, in order more plainly and distinctly to *see* the images now about to appear: an almost necessary turning away of the seer's eye from the throne of glory to the series of pictures about to unfold themselves before it. The same imperative *see* is still more strongly emphasized (xvii. 1; xxi. 9), "I will show thee." It is the very same invitation which the Divine Majesty in the days of humiliation gave (John i. 39); a simple phrase, available for the common purposes of life, and, at the same time, a sacred form of speech applied in Holy Writ to the loftiest subjects, as we see in Psalm xlvi. 8; lxvi. 5; and Joel iii. 11. We would derive from it, and from the voice of thunder from out the throne, the impressive warning: Let no one seek to see heavenly visions or future events without the right voice calling to him, "*Come and see.*"

But that we may overlook nothing on the way, there is that voice rising *from the midst* of the four living creatures, which graciously interferes to set limits to the horrors of famine. In this wonderful book are many voices which prompt our questionings, but permit of no confident answer.



Here, nowever, it appears to us (though we would not dogmatize on the point) that it is neither that of Jesus himself—as many think, who compare the passage with chap. v. 6—nor yet some special angel, but merely a visionary voice interposed as accompaniment and explanation to the appearance of the third rider. It is sometimes difficult to determine exactly where the voices of angels occur, but we prefer to keep always within the limits of certainty so far as we are able to apprehend them.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ANGEL HAVING THE SEAL FOR THE  
SERVANTS OF GOD.

## REVELATION VII.

AFTER the appalling prospective glance at the day of wrath, the wrath of the Lamb, the opening of the seventh seal, with its seven trumpets, does not immediately follow. We have an interlude, as in the case of the seven trumpets, only less long; an interlude which prepares us for the plagues. The holding of the winds previous to the impending storm of judgments, is something different indeed, from the solemn silence in heaven which accompanied the opening of the seventh seal, and yet it has a certain connexion with it. There has been a good deal of very unnecessary controversy as to whether a time of refreshing rest or of distressing sultriness is hereby intended, for in the nature of things, the one must inevitably pass over into the other, and we have unmistakable evidence of the latter condition. The period of rest, viewed under one aspect, appears certainly favourable for the sealing or securing from hurt of God's servants; but, on the other hand, such a preternatural stillness always contains, for understanding minds, a prophecy and threat of woe to come. Experienced sailors tremble when the wind goes entirely down, and in the garden of the King, mentioned in the

Song of Solomon (iv. 16), the living water and the sunshine are not more necessary than the blowing of the north and south wind in order that the spices may flow out.

The four winds from the four corners or ends of the earth (the four quarters of the earth, xx. 8), or, as in Zech. vi. 5, of heaven (compare also Dan. viii. 8; xi. 4), appear, in their primary sense, to be a natural image, like the winds that scatter the people of Israel (Jer. xlix. 36), or the four striving winds, in Dan. vii. 2. But in the Apocalypse, such images have always a latent reference to the powers of the spiritual world. We see this exemplified in the four angels who hold or *loose* the winds (for we find in the second verse that this latter office is equally theirs); and the comparison of this, their *restraining* of the hurting influences, with the fact of the four angels bound (ix. 14), seems actually to point, not certainly to *bad* angels having such immediate sway over the forces of nature and the events of history, but to that agency of angels of wrath and woe, ministering servants to the Lord's displeasure, which this book so often reveals to us. If this be so, then the four winds held by the four angels, are, in point of fact, four other angels not bound as being in themselves *bad*, only prohibited for a time from exercising the power to hurt, which they had previously received from God as a general commission. *The earth*, or land, may perhaps signify Christendom, as the more immediate object of interest; *the sea*, the heathen and distant nations; and to these are added *the trees*, which, according to the symbolical language of prophecy, may here stand for kingdoms or kings.

Everywhere in the Apocalypse we have abundant illustrations of difference of rank in the spirit and angel world.

In this particular passage, we have the command (enforced in action), by some angels to others, not to begin their work, further enforced by a loud voice heard by the seer, the voice of *another* angel, one still higher in nature and office. He now ascends in visible majesty, shining from the east, as one of the four corners of the heaven; from the east, out of which the Sun of salvation has shone out upon the earth, and utters his express command by a loud cry, "Hold! not yet." He it is who, before the activity of those subordinate angels begins, has work of his own given him to do; he it is who holds in his hands the seal of the living God. Not indeed that it is necessary to suppose that in reality an individual angel did accomplish this sealing; but he was appointed; and this remark applies to all the similar features of the vision—appointed to afford John a visible representation of a spiritual reality.<sup>1</sup>

"*And the angel said, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads!*"—This sealing, which is also in a certain degree a securing or defending against hurt, a sealing up, signifies primarily a seal of confirmation, a mark, a distinction, such as it was customary in the East in days of old to confer; and here the seal of the living God is placed in holy contrast to the idolatrous and blasphemous mark of the beast; and, as in chap. xiii. 17, this mark is interpreted as the name of the beast, or the number of his name, so in chap. xiv. 1, (iii. 12), and again in chap. xxii. 4, we read of the name of the Lamb, and of his Father, written on the foreheads of the saints. And, as in Ezekiel ix. 4, we read of a mark set upon the fore-

<sup>1</sup> We read in ver. 1, not "After these things it came to pass," but "After these things I saw."

heads of the men that sigh and cry for all the abominations of Jerusalem; and in Eph. iv. 30, find that believers generally are spoken of as sealed unto the day of redemption; so here we have a more special and restricted sealing for a certain number of the elect before the impending judgment. Compare Matt. xxiv. 31; Ps. cvii. 3. Whether and how this was to be historically fulfilled, will come later under consideration. The words of the angel are at first quite general, being applicable to all the *servants of God*, to those who are faithful, submissive, active in their obedience,—as this honourable Old Testament appellation implies in the Book of Revelation, from first to last, from chaps. i. 1, ii. 20, to xxii. 36; and there is a remark of Harms, when preaching on the prophecies of Daniel, which we may very profitably apply to this passage: “They that are sealed are not future servants of the Lord, not those who will afterwards become so, but who actually are so now. Let this sink into our own hearts. Let us ask ourselves, ‘Am I, are we sealed?’”

We go on to read: “*Till we seal.*”—Thus speaks the mighty angel, like to a prince having many servants and helpers at command, yet humbly numbering himself among them, which is an image of much holy significance. *The servants of our God*, for the angels, from the highest to the lowest, are all fellow-servants with us of the God whom we alike adore. On their *foreheads* (as in Ezekiel), the mark and seal of God is to be thus stamped on the children of men, because it is the face, especially the brow, on which individual character is most clearly read by the beholder, so that the expression *written on his forehead* is become current in our daily speech. The beast indeed has his servants marked in their right hands as well, denoting thus their outward conduct; but the living God

distinguishes his own, as formerly the high-priests of Israel were distinguished by the golden inscription upon the brow, "Holiness to the Lord." True, it often remains unknown and unread by men, a secret they do not share. "The Lord" (and the Lord only) "knoweth them that are his." But, on the other hand, in the case of many and many an elect soul, the departing from iniquity, because they name the name of Christ in sincerity and truth, is open and manifest to the world. And thus the holy seal is still seen shining out of the East, preserving from hurt, and commanding reverence.

But all this is merely a general application of the angel's speech. The thorough exposition of its special meaning now demands a few words regarding the sealed ones enumerated in vers. 4-8, the number of whom *he heard*, as well as their names called over to him, in all probability by the same angel. And first of all we protest against exegetical subtleties which would contradict the evident meaning of the text, by confounding the hundred and forty and four thousand, who are represented as still living on the earth, and sealed against the impending plagues that are to desolate it, with the worshippers before the throne spoken of in ver. 9; and the more that whereas the first are "*of all the tribes of the children of Israel*," the second are gathered out of all nations and kindreds and tongues. Nor is it possible to amalgamate the two passages by supposing that the tribes only typify the spiritual Israel, since, in the former case, John gives a definite number to the sealed; in the latter he speaks of the worshippers as a multitude which no man could number. And although, indeed, the Revelation of John makes no distinct mention of the restoration of the Jews, and their latter-day glory in their own land, yet a distinction between Israel and the

other nations is recognised as enduring, as by no means utterly abolished in the kingdom of Christ. Certainly, it is not in their character of Israelites, but as the servants of God that these chosen ones are sealed; but still they are clearly described as being of Israel after the flesh. We, for our part, maintain—although fully to substantiate our views would require a commentary on the whole of the Apocalypse—that it is not *only* the plagues of the latter times that are here spoken of, and that the sealed are not those exclusively who are to survive the “end of days,” but that we are simply to understand by these sealed ones the *remnant* of Israel (Rom. xi. 5), which the seven thousand reserved in the days of Elijah typified. According to Bengel, “Soon after the time of John, great calamities fell upon the earth, especially upon the Jewish people; but there was a remnant chosen out of them, which was to endure, and to be preserved through those and through all succeeding calamities until now.” In the same spirit Von Meyer observes, “This sealing has a prophetic reference to all future times of earthly storm and tribulation, such scenes being present to the seer in his visions.” Yes, we are here assured, in a marvellous manner, and one that abases our presumptuous conjectures, that the Lord has not only watched over and led his people Israel throughout all ages—of which, indeed, we have historical evidence before our eyes—but that he also recognises and registers the posterity of those still existing ten tribes, which are so mixed up with other nations as to be undiscoverable by us. The order in which the twelve tribes here stand differs from that elsewhere observed in Scripture, which leads us to infer some special reason for this particular arrangement. First, we have the two brothers, Leah’s sons, Judah the Prince taking precedence of Reuben, the first-born; then the two sons

of Leah's maid; then Naphtali, son of Rachel's maid, Bilhah, with Manasseh put in the place of Dan; then, again, two of Leah's elder, and her two younger sons; lastly, the brothers borne to Jacob by his beloved Rachel, Joseph standing in the place of Ephraim, as in Amos vi. 6, and Psalm lxxx. 1.

That Levi, after the removal of his priesthood, should appear in the list of the tribes, was necessary. But the reason why Dan should be the one omitted, in order that the number be kept to twelve, and yet Joseph's double claim preserved, is as yet a mystery. Finally, we would just state here our conviction that the hundred and forty-four thousand virgin souls who appear following the Lamb in chap. xiv., are not to be identified with the same number of sealed out of the tribes of Israel.



## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE WORSHIP OF ALL THE ANGELS.

#### REVELATION VII.

ONE of the most intelligible, yet glorious passages of this book, one that requires commentary less than any other, is this, which relates to the countless hosts of the blessed before the throne, to their glorious apparel, and their songs of praise. The Christian Church has always appropriated this lofty strain to its most sacred uses. As in chap. iv. 10 we saw the crowned elders cast their crowns of gold down before the throne, so here the great multitude of the saved and redeemed ascribed their salvation, their redemption out of great tribulation, to God and to the Lamb.

It is true that *all the angels* cannot praise and thank God in quite the same way as this, but they, too, after their manner, do thank and praise him with us and for us, do take delight in and return thanks for our blessedness here, as before, in chap. v. 11, 12. There they worship the Lamb; here, on the other hand, we read God, our God. But both are one; the worship and its objects are essentially the same. Still, that we may not imagine the fulness of celestial liturgies to be adequately represented by an unvarying formula, we here find some differences in the order of

the sevenfold ascription of praise. In the fifth chapter, the hymn concluded with "honour, and glory, and blessing;" here it begins with "blessing and glory." Wisdom, power, and might we have in both, but here honour precedes power and might. And here, too (instead of riches), we have a new word of praise in the middle of the sentence, *thanksgiving* precedes honour. Also the solemn "Amen" of the four living creatures in chap. v. is here spoken by *all the angels*, and the elders as well; and it is also doubled, used at the beginning, as well as at the close of the doxology, or in all probability, according to the most correct reading of the original, at the beginning only, thus leaving the strongest emphasis to dwell on the closing words, "*for ever and ever.*"

## CHAPTER XX.

## THE THREEFOLD WOE.

## REVELATION VIII.

IN heaven itself, so full of the melody of praise and the activity of immortal life, silence prevails for a while, the silence of expectation, while the Lamb opens the seventh seal,—the last. Whether there was, or ever will be, a corresponding period of repose upon earth we may indeed ask, but the text affords us no certain answer. We merely read of what further happened in heaven, not certainly, as many have supposed, during the silence, but after this preparatory pause, and as the beginning of the events consequent upon the opening of the last seal. "*The seven angels which stand before God*" (possibly archangels), are seen by John, and to these exalted angels seven trumpets are given, with whose contents or consequences the whole remainder of his revelation is more or less concerned.

These trumpets are not to be understood, as some have supposed, to be merely an image of the far-sounding and world-wide notoriety of the impending events, akin to the trumpet attributed to Fame in classical language. The angels are not to be employed in making known on earth what has already taken place, but in giving the signal for what is yet to happen. The signal is derived from the sacred imagery of the Old Testament, where we find that

the trumpets of Israel were alike sounded to gather together the congregation of the Lord, and to give the signal for battle. In the New Testament, we find both these applications of the image. In Matt. xxiv. 31, our Lord uses it in the first sense when he speaks of the gathering of the elect; Paul, again, applies it to illustrate the preparation for conflict at the call of the word, while in chap. xv. 22, and 1 Thess. iv. 16, we read of the last trumpet that heralds the resurrection. John, in the Revelation, however, generally employs the symbol as the signal to battle and distress, woe and judgment.

And now all proceeds with slow and solemn deliberation. Between the giving of the trumpets, and the preparing of the angels to sound them, we have an interlude, during which *another angel* appears in heaven, which continues to open out more and more widely to the gaze of the seer. A golden altar before the throne, an altar of incense and burnt-offering, resembling the earthly types in the original temple, now becomes visible.

The office of this *other* angel, is first of all to add the offering of *much incense* to the prayers of the saints (v. 8), which accompany the divine judgments, thus lending them new strength out of the sanctuary. Next, he takes fire from the altar, fills the censer with it, and casts it upon the earth, thus symbolizing the burning fire of the zeal of the Lord of hosts, as well as the praying zeal of his people, and thus solemnly announcing—accompanied by voices, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake—the divine judgments about to fall upon the earth.

The first four trumpets, like the first four seals, are the most intimately connected, and they rapidly succeed each other. Between these four, and the last three, the terrors and horrors that take place are brought to a mighty

climax by the dread interlude of a special angelic cry, which we now proceed to comment upon. This cry is that of an angel, for although the literal words of the seer, in the original, imply that what he saw and heard was, in point of fact, an *eagle*, yet on comparing the passage with ch. xiv. 6, and, indeed, from the very nature of the case, we cannot suppose that between visions so solemn as these the image of merely a speaking animal would be introduced. No! it is an angel of judgment represented under this figure, with reference to the significant mention of the eagle throughout Holy Writ (the vulture being included under that name), as the appointed devourer of all that is vile and refuse. See Job ix. 26; xxxix. 30; Hab. i. 8; and even Deut. xxviii. 49. Compare with these passages that in Matt. xxiv., where the Lord himself reveals the meaning of the emblem by the fundamental law of all God's judgments, which only strike at what is already corrupt, and remove that which is ready to vanish away. Perhaps there may also be in these words of our Lord some allusion to the influence of avenging angels, exerted under cover of the Roman legions, against Jerusalem, as well as against a corrupt Christendom, under cover of other human instruments; whereas, in Rev. xix. 17, 48, on the contrary, the flesh-devouring birds gathered to the great supper, are to be understood as human executors of the dread judgments of God.

Through the midst, or in the height of heaven, far above the doomed earth, with his keen glance ranging over it far and wide, the awful angel flies, and utters his hoarse cry, which sounds like that of some ominous bird of prey, "*Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, by reason of the other voices of the trumpet of the three angels, which are yet to sound.*"

The loving and gracious Lord himself had oftentimes denounced *woe* to the rebellious, a sevenfold woe to the Pharisees, a more emphatic sentence still against Judas his betrayer; how, then, shall we dare to wonder that we find an angel doing likewise? We are here taught to lay aside all that sentimental tenderness which, in defiance of the plainest statements of Holy Writ, would endue our Father in heaven with no other attribute than that of mercy.

Further, this eagle-like angel does not speak in the language of exhortation, like the one in chap. xiv. 6, 7, having the everlasting gospel to preach before the hour of judgment come; he only cries out, *Woe* to the earth,—woe to the *inhabitants* of the earth, having their home there, minding earthly things, without care or interest for the better, the heavenly country. Woe to them as being the enemies of the saints (vi. 10), they shall perish with the earth; they are men who have not God's seal upon their foreheads (ix. 4); whose names are not written in the book of life (xiii. 8). Again, the expression *inhabitants of earth* is used (xiii. 12, 14; xii. 12) in direct opposition to the dwellers in heaven. This threefold woe proclaimed by the angel, precedes the three last trumpets which herald more dreadful judgments still than those which came before,—judgments which themselves have the name of *woes*: chap. ix. 12, "*One woe is past,*" after which come two others: chap. xi. 14, "*The second woe is past, the third cometh quickly;*" lastly, in chap. xii. 12, "*Woe to the earth and to the sea,*" as well as in chap. xviii. 10, 16, 19, the thrice-repeated woe over the fallen Babylon, so that we have a sevenfold woe in all. And as we find that these three last woes follow one upon another, and that one prepares and announces the other, we are forced to conclude

that these trumpets, at all events, signify closely-linked historical events, whether the first four do so or not. From this time we find a marking of time by mystic dates (see ix. 5, 15; xii. 14; xiv. 5), and yet I frankly confess that not one of the commentaries written up to the present hour commends itself to me as altogether satisfactory or conclusive, and I am almost ready to maintain that it is best to postpone our systematic exposition of this mysterious book till the Lord himself, by his coming, open out the whole course of history to our retrospective glance. Meanwhile, we have enough for our edification and our strengthening. The fundamental idea of the whole book, and the grand provisions it awakens in us, are fraught with practical instruction, even though we relinquish the attempt to arrive at any chronological order, or to make the visions fit in with any definite series of historical events.

## CHAPTER XXI.

## THE ANGEL WITH THE LITTLE BOOK OPEN.

## REVELATION X.

WE have seen that before the opening of the seventh seal, which contained the seven trumpets, there was a preparatory interlude, and we now find that the sounding of the last trumpet is in like manner preceded by a still fuller episode. "*Another mighty angel.*"—The combination in this expression has something in common both with the *strong* angel with the book (v. 2), and the *other* angel (vii. 2); which may also be compared with chap. xviii. 1: "*another angel having great power.*" The present angel *comes down from heaven*, descending out of the sphere of God's hidden counsels to bring a *little book*—part, no doubt, of the contents of the former book which we saw opened, and called *little* in contradistinction to it. This book, as might indeed almost have been inferred after the opening of the seventh seal—had we not an express statement of the fact given—is an *open* book, which means that henceforth the revelation will be comparatively less mysterious. Heaven (with its archetypal temple, xi. 1), more widely opened, is the scene of visions more sublime in their heaven and earth-embracing scope, while events hurry on more and more rapidly to the appointed end.



This angel's visible form and clothing borders, indeed, upon the majesty of the Lord's own appearance in chap. i., but yet he is only what he is called, an angel. "*He is clothed with a cloud,*" and thus all his brightness is not permitted to appear, as later, in chap. xviii., we shall find to be the case with regard to another angel; for as yet the plagues and dread judgments still in part obscure the glory; but yet the rainbow—type of reconciliation—(which in chap. iv. 3, we first saw encircling the throne of God) and the sun-like lustre of his face, testify to the breaking forth of grace through all. We are told that the righteous shall shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom, and therefore do not wonder that an angel's face should have an equal brightness. His feet also are described, as in chap. i. 15, as glowing with a less radiant light, "*his feet are as pillars of fire.*" Thus the angel may be said to appear above, like the sun; below, like the heavy, lightning-rent storm-cloud—fit semblance of his office, as annunciator of the last fearful judgments. Akin to this is the meaning of this mighty one being represented with "*his right foot upon the sea and his left upon earth,*" as we find it written in Ps. lxxxix. 25, of the great King, that his *hand* or might shall be set in the sea and in the rivers. In a general way this means the whole globe, but it has also a special reference to the triumphant spread of God's kingdom throughout the *islands* of prophetic speech, those coasts most remote from the land of Asia. Perhaps the expression may also secretly have some slight connexion with the two beasts, the one rising out of the sea, the other out of the earth (xiii. 1, 4), which are to be overcome by the Divine might. The angel further asserts, by this setting of his feet on land and sea, that both are God's territory, however his enemies may for a season occupy them.

For the rest, we think it advisable here to remind our readers, in connexion with these symbolic forms assumed by angels in prophetic visions, that the difference between this mode of manifestation, and that of the angels we read of in the historical books of Scripture, is not to mislead us into supposing the historical angels to be mere symbols. On the contrary, they throw light upon these later appearances, and we are to learn to recognise a real personal existence under the symbolic representation, else the word *angel* would not be applied in the Scriptures of truth to such. When we consider the infinite number and infinite variety of angelic life and agency, and that, according to Bible teaching, heaven and earth are full of these, and when we reflect how sparingly their appearance, whether in fact or in vision, is recorded throughout the whole of the sacred volume, with the exception of this its last book, we shall feel no surprise at the prominence into which, from the very nature of the Apocalypse, they are brought before us in its pages.

“*The mighty angel cries with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth*” (Isa. xxi. 8; Amos iii. 8).—We are led by these words back to the mention, in a former passage, of the Lion of Judah, who had already conquered, and was further to conquer. This cannot have been a mere cry or scream without articulate words, though *what* it was that he cried to the seven thunders is no more actually recorded than in the case of the voices of the thunders. The definite article, *the seven thunders*, implies some definite reference, and we find this reference made to Ps. xxix., that hymn of praise to God in the storm, which receives its full prophetic and symbolic commentary in this passage of the Apocalypse. All mighty things praise the Mightier; nay the alone Mighty, who manifests himself in these tremendous

world-convulsing judgments, with this one and only purpose, that *in his temple every one shall speak of his glory*, and that after the flood of sin his regal throne may be the more firmly established, the happy result of which will be his giving strength to his people, yea, his giving to them the blessing of peace. According to this view, it will be evident that the seven thunders which John heard, are not to be interpreted as mysteriously marking seven periods of time, still less as mere curses, as Herder has very mistakenly supposed; but are rather celestial ascriptions of praise to the mighty God latent even in the chastening and destroying exhibitions of his power. To which we would add Von Meyer's beautiful remark: "These thunder voices have not each special words of their own, they speak with one sound, one comprehensive harmony, into the ear of the Spirit."

John, in accordance with the general instructions he had received (i. 11, 19), was about to write what he had heard, but the commandment now came: "*Seal up*" those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not. In connexion with this *sealing up*, which implies a forbidden unsealing, see Dan. xii. 4, 9; we would only here observe, that this *voice from heaven* is certainly not that of the angel who stands on sea and land, and neither is the command given in ver. 8 his, but (as we also find in chap. xi. 12) the very voice of the Lord himself.

Finally, however, we have a speech of the mighty angel written down for our instruction. It is an *oath* by Him who liveth for ever, as in Dan. xii. 7; and as we find there it is intended to mark out the duration of the time before the final fulfilment, with this difference, that here only the *right* hand is lifted up to heaven, the left holding the little book. Again, John only gives us the former part of the speech

indirectly, quoting the direct words of the angel only in the 7th verse: "*And swear by him that liveth in the eternities of eternities, who has created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that a time shall no more be.*" Here we have an already familiar formula; and on the phrase "heaven, earth, and sea" (as also xiv. 7), we have already commented (v. 13). Nor does the sublimely solemn expression, "in the eternities of eternities," require any explanation either; nay, it even defies it. The proper translation, however, is the one we have given, though the nature of these æons or eternities, spoken of as periods of time in unending time, transcends our present powers of comprehension. To these unending eternities is opposed the contrast of *a time*, which is, indeed, the most important feature in the angel's speech, *a time* slowly passing away, according to the laws of time, and bringing about the end. In mysterious words, to be understood according to the measure of eternity, the oath of the angel certifies, "*A time shall be no more, but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall sound, the mystery of God is finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets.*" That this passage does not literally mean the final cessation of time, is evident from the expression *in the days of the voice* of the seventh trumpet. Consequently, the phrase must have some special sense of its own, nor is it difficult for us to discover it in a book so abounding in parallel passages, and therefore so self-explanatory, as that of Revelation. The Greek word *chronos* applies equally to a long interval, a respite, a delay, a postponement, and we have already had several instances in which it has been so used, as, for instance, in chap. xi. 21, where we find it rendered "*space to repent,*" and

chap. vi. 11, where it stands for a further period of rest and expectation. Therefore the meaning is simply this, that whereas the angel with the seal demands an interval of time before the opening of the seventh seal, which interval is to be employed in sealing the servants of God, so this angel, on the contrary, denies any further space for repentance, any respite for the ungodly before the sounding of the seventh trumpet. He affirms that stroke is to succeed stroke, and that in a certain limited period all will be finished. This period, however, may still seem a long one measured by our human standard; but in relation to that season of waiting in which God has spoken through the mouth of his holy prophets since the world began (Acts iii. 21), it is so short that it can hardly be called any time at all. Accordingly, in chap. xiv., the warning angels are quickly succeeded by the reaping angels. But all attempts at exact reckoning are worse than useless here.

The angel's expression, *the mystery of God*, has a verbal reference to one of the most striking passages in Old Testament prophecy: "The Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secrets unto his servants the prophets" (Amos iii. 7). All that God has spoken must and shall be *finished*; the *restitution* will be complete (Acts iii. 21); the *words of God* in prophecy will all be fulfilled (xvii. 17). Here, in the passage immediately under consideration, however, we have not the future tense, *shall* be finished, but the positive and present, *is* finished. And it is further said, with a significance we should err in passing over, that it is to be finished *as God* had declared the mystery of his holy will and counsel; *declared*, or literally *evangelized*, made known as good tidings to his servants. For even the final judgment—the goal, the very essence, so to speak, of the divine purpose and prevision—will se-

cure for ever the salvation of his redeemed people, and the glory of God's triumphant justice and holiness. Not only are we here assured, from the lofty lips of an angel, how far-reaching, even to the final fulfilment, and how comprehensive are the words of the prophets of old, but we also learn here that these prophets (more or less clearly indeed) had already themselves received a *gospel*, as the very essence of the prophecies they were commissioned to deliver (see 1 Pet. i. 11, 12, where the apostle says the very same thing in other words).

We may observe that the Revelation of John, which we have found, and shall further find, resting almost throughout on ancient prophecy, and evolved thence; for that very reason avoids individual quotations, but here, in its midst, gives us a general and comprehensive quotation once for all, thus, as it were, endorsing and completing all foregoing prophetic utterances whatever, though unable evidently to refer specially to them all. Thus, for example, the return of the Jews to the Holy Land, and many other prophecies of specific facts which John does not particularly touch upon, are yet included in this mystery of God which shall be finished. It is ours to seek out the instances in which this last prophetic book coincides with former prophecies, and where we fail to discover the coincidence, patiently to wait for the fulfilment, which will make clear the whole.

In verse 8, we read that the voice from heaven is again heard by John, but we find that although he is commanded by it to take the little book out of the angel's hand, he timidly approaches, and prays the angel to give it him. *And the angel said unto him*, perhaps not quite unexpectedly, since John must have been reminded of a like occurrence in the history of Ezekiel: "*Take, and eat it*

up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be sweet as honey in thy mouth." Thus Ezekiel had also been commanded in a vision to eat, yea to fill himself with a certain book, in order that he might prophesy its contents; and this is one of the most complete images of the personal effects of *inspiration*, showing it to be a very different matter from mere *dictation*, or mere *showing*, such as we find mentioned elsewhere.

We know, indeed, that *inspiration* is something different from actual personal experience; nay, does not even imply a perfect understanding of the very inspired words themselves, but it does point to a degree of sympathy in the prophets, upon which we are apt not to lay sufficient stress. Though Ezekiel merely tells us that the book, written within and without with mourning, lamentation, and woe, was sweet as honey in his mouth, we cannot doubt that he too had, like the seer, his share of after bitterness. Here we find that John, who is by this eating of the book expressly associated with the old prophets, also experiences at first a sense of sweetness and joy in receiving Divine communications, but soon sorrow, on account of their mournful nature, succeeds. And, indeed, the *evangelizing*, to the prophets, must always have been fraught with a certain degree of bitterness to human nature. "For in much wisdom there is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Eccles. i. 18). The angel had announced this bitterness first, that John might neither wonder nor fear, but the seer himself inverts this order, and names first the sweetness of honey in the mouth.

Once more the same angel speaks (ver. 11), and declares the meaning of the eating of the little open book. It implies fresh preparation and inspiration for further pro-

phesy : “ *Thou must prophesy again before many peoples and nations, and tongues, and kings.*”

Ezekiel, we are expressly told, was not sent to strange nations of hard language (Ezek. iii. 5), but to the house of Israel. John, on the contrary, has no immediate commission for Israel after the flesh; rather he is *again* (beginning, as it were, anew) to receive and write as before, prophecies for all manner of people and nations whatever. He is to announce wrath and punishment to the enemies of God, salvation and triumph to believers, who, during the space of time to which his future prophecies particularly refer, are the people of God contained in the midst of, and to be assembled and delivered from, every nation and kindred, and people and tongue, as we have already read in chap. vii. 9. But here we have *kings* added to the list, not in the sense of kingdoms, but rather (see the mention of them, chap. vi. 15) the hostile kings of whom we hear so much from chaps. xvi. to xix., till, in chap. xxi. 24, we read of their final submission to the King of kings.

That throughout the eleventh chapter we have not the continued address of the angel, but the voice of the Lord himself (already heard, ch. x. 4, 8), is unmistakable, from the expression made use of in verse 3, “*I will give my two witnesses.*” But that the angel who swore by Him who was greater than himself, is to be understood as meaning Christ, we positively deny. There are marvellous transformations in the vision, manifold differences of kind and degree. There are alternations of appearances and voices, perhaps in order that John should not be wearied by uniformity, and so his mind be unable to grasp and retain the whole. Thus, for instance, in chap. xi., we may observe—and the remark is applicable to many other passages—



that in verse 11, the *hearing of what is spoken*, evidently changes into a *beholding of what is announced*, as though it were actually happening before the seer's eyes; and thus the interlude leads again to the visions of the seventh trumpet.

## CHAPTER XXII.

THE THREE ANGELS THAT HERALD THE  
FALL OF BABYLON.

## REVELATION XIV.

NEW thanks and praise resounding through heaven, the mysteries of whose sanctuaries are more and more revealed to the seer. The great wonder of the woman clothed with the sun, and crowned with stars, and having the moon under her feet; the enmity of the dragon against this woman and her unborn son; the victory of Michael over the old serpent; the woman's flight and rescue; the two beasts to whom the dragon gave power and cunning; their blasphemy and cruel tyranny exercised on the earth;—such have been the contents of the intervening chapters, in which no words of the angels have demanded our notice; the voices in chaps. xi. 15, xii. 10, evidently not being angelic voices. All that is said in these chapters on this mysterious, atheistical, and antitheistical power, especially its climax as an actual kingdom, under the first and second beasts (the last of whom we shall later find designated as the false prophet, chap. xvi. 13)—reminds us strongly of the visions of Daniel the prophet. In strong contrast to the horrors taking place on the earth, and comfortably prefiguring the certainty of eventual victory, we have now the repeated appearance of *The Lamb*, as the text

ought to be rendered,—the *true* Lamb (in contradistinction to xiii. 11), who stands in triumph upon the heavenly Mount Zion (Heb. xii. 22), with another great multitude of elect and undefiled, who, instead of the name of the beast, have the seal of the Divine name on their foreheads, first-fruits of the saints, whose eternally new song sounds at first in the ears of John like the sound of many waters; then being heard more nearly and distinctly is as the voice of a great thunder; and lastly, as a heavenly song of harpers harping with their harps.

According to the system of alternation pursued in the book of Revelation, we are allowed this intermediate consolatory glance at the glory of heaven, between the dark records of earthly rebellion, “as when, round the base of a mountain, lightnings flash and thunders roar, and pestilential vapours gather thickly, while above its far peak shines out a very paradise, full of light and song, and blessed peace and harmony.”—(Herder.) The exquisite vision in the beginning of chapter xiv. succeeds to the account of earthly conflict and war, and prefaces the terrible events of that portion of the Apocalypse which we are now about to consider. The *seventh* trumpet of the seventh seal introduces the seven vials of the last plagues; but these are in like manner preceded by an announcement and warning, on the part of *three angels*, of a different character to the proclamation of the one angel with the three woes; but parallel in some measure to the two reaping angels of the double harvest who follow, and whose cry and actions alike contain a forewarning and probably an image also of the *End*, history having run its complete course. Indeed, the whole of chap. xiv., let commentators affix to it whatever special historical meaning they will, is rather to be understood as a general outline of the near-

approaching and all-deciding future ; a comprehensive outline in the first place, followed by a more precise progressive development ; being the plan upon which all the visions in this book proceed.

The first three angels here mentioned are connected with the fall and judgment of Babylon. One of these brings salvation once more within the reach of all who give glory to God and fear him ; the second announces the fall of the great city ; and the third the terrible punishment of those who would not let themselves be redeemed.

As for interpreting the first angel to mean any one celebrated man in the annals of Church history, whether Wycliffe, Huss, or Luther, we might almost call the idea absurd, but for our respect for the godly men who have entertained it. If the first angel be indeed to be understood in such a way, whom may the second and the third angels be supposed to represent ? This is an instance of the difficulties attending that minute and positive system of exegesis which we have throughout treated as a mistaken one. How, when, or through whose agency any historical fact answering to this vision has been brought about, or may be brought about, are questions we can safely deal with in very general terms.

We hold that such magnificent symbols as those seen by John, can in no way be understood to represent any individual human beings, but that a great succession of events was thus prefigured to him, and in every case (as we have before stated in our exposition of the little book) by actual and by different angels.

“ *And I saw ANOTHER angel* (not the angel of the last trumpet, nor any of the former) *fly in the midst of heaven* (or high up in heaven, like the eagle, viii. 13, only this angel wears a human form), *having an everlasting gospel to preach*

to them that sit and dwell in earth, and over all nations, and kindred, and tongues, and people."—These words of John do not indeed directly contain the very speech of the angel, that follows in the next verse; but yet they require our consideration as in a measure essential to it, for it is probable that this explanatory introduction to his loud cry was given by the angel himself to the seer. This *preaching* is to all men alike, though the heathen seem to be more peculiarly pointed out, as those for whom this old, unchangeable, everlasting gospel would be new; so that we may here have some special reference to the era which began at the Reformation, an era to which belong the activity of missionary enterprise and the spread of the Bible in all portions of the earth. It may also have a reference to that preaching of the gospel of the kingdom foretold by Jesus (Matt. xxiv. 14) before the end. But it is quite evident that Christendom cannot be excluded from the advantages of this universal preaching.

"*Fear God, and give glory to him, for the hour of his judgment is come. And worship him that made heaven and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of water.*"—This hardly sounds like the message of salvation, the glad tidings, or gospel. Nevertheless, the proffered salvation is the very ground of the *acceptance* by God of the fear, glory, and worship of sinners, and the introductory passage is intended to teach us this. "*Glory to him,*"—this is the beginning and end of all preaching of the gospel to every fresh hearer, and this truth was the fundamental idea of the Reformation. The doctrine of the creation and the judgment, the first and the last, are here connected, as in the speech of the apostle Paul at Athens (Acts xvii. 24-31). For these are the two fundamental truths that constitute the knowledge of the true living and

holy God, and between these stands the gospel of grace, to save fallen creatures from the terrors of the judgment. To the heathen, this primary knowledge of God, forgotten, obscured, wholly lost, as it often is, in their case, is to be brought forward once more. They are to fear the God who created them; and that they may do this, they are to know that this God will judge them. But, alas! even in Christendom itself, these two fundamental truths are often denied or ignored, and thus it is necessary, in times of unbelief, that the preaching of the gospel should return to first principles, and emphatically represent God under the character of Creator and Judge, in order that the everlasting gospel may protest with fresh earnestness against a prevalent apostasy. In opposition to the false philosophy of nature, God is here prominently set forth as the Creator of all things; not only is the sea the work of his hands, but also the fountains of water, "fountains of the great deep," whence once already judgment has sprung. And again, this God asserts himself as judge, not merely through the agency of the human conscience, but through temporal consequences as well. That, as regards Babylon, the hour of his judgments is nearly come, is evident from the pride that goeth before a fall. Babylon's haughty defiance prophesies her approaching ruin. For the era of missions and revivals is also the era of Rome's renewed energy, and the revolutionary efforts of anti-Christianity.

*"And another (a second, this is implied in the original) angel followed, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, because she made all nations drunk with the wine of the wrath of her fornication."*—To state what in our opinion Babylon, or Babel, signifies from beginning to end of the Apocalypse, and to assign all our reasons for that opinion, would be a longer task than we have at present

undertaken. We will merely say that the typical name of Babel may be found given throughout the whole Bible to various powers inimical to the people of God, from the time of the first presumptuous attempt to build the heaven-scaling tower on the plain of Shinar, down through the historical career of Babylon, which the prophets and the Psalmist alike treat of as symbolizing the future, to the very last vision seen by John.

Doubtless, the Roman empire (1 Pet. v. 13), and the ecclesiastical dominion that succeeded to its fall, is to be understood as being this Babylon, but it has not yet completely fulfilled the type, nor will it do this standing alone. The perfect antitype is yet to come, and will be presented by a tremendous union of the powers of the Church and State. The woman—the great whore—is to ride upon the beast; and after a long course of hypocrisy the beast will at length openly conclude the last alliance with her against God. I have already said in my sermon on the occasion of the Tri-centenary of the Reformation, “Look to Rome and Paris both, if you seek for Babylon.” The impending and near-approaching fall of this Babylon is now assumed by the warning of the angel in his cry, which is a summary, as it were, of the history contained in the eighteenth chapter. Babylon is said to be *fallen*—an expression of which we have already had examples in Isa. xxi. and Jer. li. 8. “*Great Babylon.*” Thus it is called literally, according to the proud boast of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. iv. 27). That this mother of harlots and abominations of the earth, in her latest phase of development, will, not so much by external violence, as by the bewildering influence of her lying wonders, seduce to spiritual fornication, *i.e.*, apostasy, had been already signified by the way in which the old prophets had spoken of her *witchcraft*,

and we find the same fact here expressed by her making the nations drunk with her intoxicating wine (chap. xvii. 4), which wine we have afterwards characterized as *the wine of the wrath of God* (ver. 10). And hence we have in the word *because* the connexion marked out between her sin and her fall.

Such is the preaching of the second angel, from which we may deduce for our edification the eternal truth of God's word applicable to all times alike. The world and the lust thereof passes away, the world and its might will be overthrown, the *apostasy* indeed is virtually already *fallen*.

As we have already seen, the beast is allied with Babylon; and it is only after her fall that his last display of strength is made, and that his final doom takes place (chap. xix. 19, 20). The second of the three angels, whose words we are now considering, dwells upon the fate of the great city; the third testifies to the fearful and everlasting punishment that is to befall the adherents of the beast. His words are as follows: "*If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive the mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of God's wrath, which is poured out without mixture in the cup of his wrath, and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb.*" This speech, which we do not give entire as yet, may well be considered the most severe, the most awful threat in the whole of Scripture; but we must not forget that the purpose of its very terror is to warn and save. Great as we find (in chap. xiii. 14-17) the number of the worshippers of the beast to be, who accept his mark on their brow and hand; yet to each and all individually these words of warning are addressed, with the ancient and familiar formula, *If any man*. "If any man;"—



these words were customarily used by the Saviour himself as a prelude to a merciful promise ; now, they are applied to threaten, the word of truth being a two-edged sword, a savour of life unto life indeed, but a savour of death unto death also.

“If any man *worship*”—not the living God, as the first angel has exhorted them to do—but the *beast*: mere man, in his degeneracy and apostasy, on account of his lying wonders of power and pleasure ; why, this is a horrible sin, and will bring down a like horrible punishment. So we are here told. Cup for cup, wrath for wrath !

The impious rage of intoxicating rebellion—the *wine of the wrath of her fornication*, as the second angel says—contains within itself *the wine of God's wrath*. This image of a *cup* is very frequently used throughout Scripture. There is a wholesome cup of affliction, which is even in Ps. cxvi. called the cup of salvation. There is the cup of wrath of severe chastisement, with a view to reformation (Isa. li. 17 ; Jer. viii. 14 ; Ps. lx. 5, 15) ; and there is a cup of unmitigated temporal destruction (Ps. lxxv. 9 ; Jer. xxv. 15). But, whereas in the cup of salvation there is a flavour, so to speak, of displeasure and judgment, and the cup of heaviest temporal visitation is invariably mingled with some proffer of grace, some remnant of mercy,—this cup on the contrary is called the cup of eternal indignation, the wine of the wrath of God *poured out without mixture* ; a cup of deadly wine (compare the kindred image in Deut. xxxii. 33). This final sentence, this unending anger, dooms the irrevocably lost to the lake of fire (chap. xix. 20, xxi. 8),—(literally, in the original, the permanent swamp or slough of the world), which is at the same time the Tophet, or place of burning (Isa. lxvi. 24, xxx. 33 ; Dan. vii. 11), and will retain a place in lieu of the depths

of the sea, and of Hades, in the central abyss of the glorified earth. This lake, with its fire and brimstone (pre-figured by the doom of Sodom), will resemble the element and the substance which we now know by these names, in the same manner as the jewelled foundations of the New Jerusalem do our present precious stones. The torments there inflicted will be *in the presence* of all the holy angels, who, with the saints and all other blessed intelligences, will exclaim at the sight: "Even so, Lord God Almighty, just and true are thy ways" (chap. xvi. 7 compared with chap. xix. 1, 2). But lastly comes the fact which more than any other denotes the utter hopelessness of this condition,—they shall be tormented in *the presence of the Lamb!*—of Him whose aspect will ever remind the doomed that they might, that they ought to have been saved! In presence of the same Lamb whose wrath (chap. vi. 16) must bring with it the torturing recollection of his wasted patience and his despised love.

But the fearful words are not ended; they reach their climax in the positive statement that these torments are of endless duration, let the theories of men upon this subject be what they may. "*And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever* (in the eternities of eternities), *and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image* (still do so, persist in doing so despite this solemn warning), *and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.*" This scripturally characteristic *whosoever*, setting forth as it does the perfect freedom of each individual to receive or not to receive the fatal mark, closes the sentence as its equivalent "if any man" began it. "*The smoke,*" in the last of the historical images, implies the conflagration of the city (xviii. 18, xix. 3); but here, where eternity is treated of, it is the mysterious symbol to

all creation of the unquenchable fire of which the Lord Jesus himself as well as the Baptist had before spoken. Even in Isaiah xxxiv. 10 we have a hint given of the abiding nature of the doom there presaged. In chap. iv. 8 the worshippers around the throne are represented as resting not day nor night; here we have, in fearful contrast, the very same words used for the tormented! There, ceaseless day, unclouded light, in the presence and glory of God; here, the blackness of darkness and the fiery torture!

Proceeding to verse 12 we find it written, "*Here is the patience of the saints; here are they that keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.*" We might indeed here plausibly enough observe, that the warning angel had a solemn but encouraging and gracious final word to address to the saints, so that the fearful threat he had just uttered might not be the last word to fall from his lips. But when we come to compare chaps. xii. 17 and xiii. 10, it does not appear very likely that the angel should only repeat here what John had already received to be written down as a comment upon his former visions; and we are ready to believe that this was an expression intercalated by the holy seer himself, a deduction of his own from the words just spoken by the angel. And yet, again, such an intercalated remark of John's would be exceedingly remarkable, just between the impressive angelic sentence and the voice from heaven, ver. 13, with nothing to divide it from the former, nothing to specify its real character. I confess, for my own part, that I cannot decide whether the passage forms part of the angel's words or of the seer's; but be this as it may, it contains a most profound meaning, a divinely-given message to us. The *keeping the commandments* (xii. 17) is identified with *patience* and *faith* in chap. xiii. 10, and

finally, in chap. xxii. 14 (where the expression *his* (Jesus') *commandments* occurs between verses 13 and 16, in both of which verses he speaks in his own person as *I*), this keeping the commandments is given as the only distinctive mark, and decisive proof of the actual, the practical, sanctification of the saints. What, indeed, is the use of pure doctrine, and an orthodox belief, unless these be accompanied by the *doing* the will of God also? Here, indeed, in chap. xiv., the words (whether of the angel or of John himself) lead us back to the ground of external obedience and Christian activity; they specially contrast with the yielding to the power of the beast, and the persecuting in his name, the *patience* or *endurance* of the saints (i. 9), as their distinguishing mark. For in what, indeed, was this endurance displayed but in keeping the commandments of God against all the opposition of man—the worshipping of God alone in sincerity and truth; while this again was only rendered possible by the strength that springs from *faith* in Jesus, as we see explicitly stated in Acts xxvi. 17. In conclusion we may remark, that in the original the word “faith of Jesus” seems here to have some meaning beyond that of “faith in Jesus”—to be akin to the expression in chap. i. 9, “the patience of Jesus Christ.” It is indeed our great Forerunner’s own faith (Heb. xii. 2), which (unless we resist it) awakens ours, and, according to the measure of our faith, lives, works, and perfects itself therein; and for further meditation on this truth we refer our thoughtful readers to Gal. ii. 20, iii. 23, and to Eph. iv. 13. The whole passage, with its introductory *here*, may be understood to say, Here, where so fearful a doom is threatened to the worshippers of the beast, is scope for the exercise of the “*patience of the saints.*”

The *voice from heaven* (ver. 13)—which, by its sublime

and universally applicable declaration, strengthens the holy and believing for further patience, ay, even unto martyrdom—forms, if we suppose the angel to have spoken ver. 12, a grand and completing sequel to his words. Here, however, it is more than an angel, it is the Spirit himself who speaks.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TWO ANGELS AT THE THRUSTING IN OF  
THE SICKLES.

REVELATION XIV. 15—18.

THAT these two angels, with the two holders of the sickles, to whom they call, constitute one fourfold symbol, just as the three angels, in the preceding verses, give in different ways one warning of the impending judgments, we have already indicated. For we, for our part, cannot look upon the first (ver. 14)—whose white cloud recalls the white horse (vi. 2, xix. 11) but is not identical with it—to be other than a *symbolical representation* of the Lord of the Harvest himself (*like unto the Son of Man*, but not he), to whom the angel, representing the servant of that Lord, points out the ripeness of the harvest and summons him to reap. For us not only is the expression *another angel* in ver. 15 decisive, although some have endeavoured to explain it as meaning *another who was an angel*, as in Luke xxiii. 32; but still more so the exact parallel of the other sickle-holder in ver. 17. Thus the first here mentioned does not in our estimation in any way occupy the same place relatively to the three who succeed him, which the rider on the white horse (vi. 2) holds relatively to the three other riders who follow him. Nor would it be easy to understand why Christ should himself, personally,

here undertake the reaping of the corn harvest, while he left the gathering of the vintage to an angel, whereas we have in other passages the contrary declaration that the Lord sends his reapers, the angels, but that he treads the wine-press of God's fury alone. Rather, he does both here equally through his servants. As Hofmann very truly observes, we have seven angels in this chapter, three who foretell, and four who fulfil. But still so much is true, the first angel, here described as gathering his servants to him, *on that account* specially represents the Lord himself.

And for the same reason we have to declare our belief that this *harvest*, generally speaking a figure of judgment and final separation of good and bad, for garnering and rejecting, is a judgment that precedes and typifies the last judgment, and that because it does this, we have the comprehensive expression twice used, *harvest of the (whole) earth, vine of the (whole) earth*. As to the further meaning of the wine-press of blood without the city, we shall have to discover it by a reference to other passages. We find that while in the parable, Matt. xiii., the harvest is described as a twofold one, wheat and tares being alike reaped and gathered, though for different purposes (in Mark iv. 29, on the contrary, the reaping with the sickle is spoken of only in relation to the wheat), so we have here, too, a double harvest; first the reaping of the wheat, then of the vintage, and the fundamental idea of this second reaping, that of the vines, originates (as is so constantly the case in this book of Revelation) in the prophecies of Joel (iii. 13), while that of the treading of the wine-press is to be found in Isaiah (lxiii.)

It is out of the *temple* in heaven, which was first implied in chap. vi. 9, viii. 3, and has since (xi. 19) been

repeatedly spoken of, remaining visible in all probability till chap. xvi. 17, that the angel comes whose cry to the reaper is as follows: "*Thrust in thy sickle and reap; for the time to reap is come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.*" Literally, *send* thy sickle, but this Hebraism is well rendered by the words "thrust in." Men do not lay hand on the sickle or scythe till the *time* be come, *till the harvest*, till that which is to be reaped has grown *ripe*, an expression we also find in Joel. Those who hold the first angel to be Christ, understand this cry in the light of a prayer: Come soon to judgment! or else, since it is not very easy thus to distort the simple words, they read them as information given to the Lord in heaven—highly improbable this!—the hour appointed by the Father's counsel and will being now come! But as we have already stated, our interpretation of the symbolic vision divides the angels into two separate classes, those who announce the ripeness of the harvest, and those who reap it. And this preparatory fulfilment may be justly understood as the frequent gathering or removal of the righteous before the breaking out of further judgment, they having become already ripe by previous tribulation. Compare with a reference to this view Isa. lvii. 1, as well as Isa. xvii. 5, and Job v. 26. Perhaps, too, Jer. li. 33 may also be alluded to (as well as Isa. xxi. 10, though Micah iv. 12 seems opposed to it), as indicating that even in the fallen Babylon itself a small harvest may have remained for this gracious reaping.

The other angel next seen coming out of the temple had, we read, *also* (the original word is even more emphatic) a sharp sickle or vine-cutter's pruning-knife, as it might be equally well rendered. To him there comes another announcing or summoning angel out from the



*altar*, namely, the altar of burnt-offering, where we have seen the souls of martyrs crying for judgment and avenging (vi. 9), whence also praise is ascribed to the just judgments of the Almighty (xvi. 7); where, again, the prayers of all the saints on earth, ascending blended (viii. 3, 4) with the incense from the altar, implore the completion of God's judgments. This angel has power *over fire* (just as we read in chap. xvi. 5, of another who has power over water), because the judgments are to be executed by the fire of wrath (viii. 5).

The vintage which is to follow the corn-harvest succeeds in like immediate manner to the loud cry of the angel. "*Thrust in thy sharp sickle and reap the clusters of the vine of the earth, for the grapes are fully ripe.*" This time, however, there is a difference of phrase; the sickle is characterized as *sharp*, and the grapes as *fully ripe*. It is nothing new in Holy Scripture to find the vine and its fruit spoken of in a bad sense as well as a good, but only, let this be well observed, with a reference to the *degeneracy* of the once noble plant, see Deut. xxx. 32; Jer. ii. 21; Isa. v. 1, 2 (as also xviii. 5 rightly rendered). We are to understand by the expression *vine of the earth*, that neither Israel nor Christendom is exclusively meant by this vintage, the results of which are so fearful. In Joel we have the expression, "the press is full, the fats overflow, for their *wickedness* is great." In the same manner we have the great wine-press spoken of here (ver. 19, 20), and mention made of its *being trodden*, according to the custom of antiquity. But *here* the juice is *blood* (Gen. xlix. 11; Deut. xxxii. 14), as in that most significant and impressive prophecy of the great wine-press treader in Isa. lxiii. 1-4.

"*Without the city.*"—Perhaps this also may have reference to Joel iii. 17, 19, so that on this occasion (unlike

chap. xi. 13) Jerusalem may be intended, but even if so, only (compare chap. xi. 8) in a typical sense. For ver. 20 here appears to have some connexion with the great wine-press, when the Lord prepares a ghastly supper of wrath, and a great sacrificial slaughter (xix. 9, 15, 17). Further, let the manner—which Isaiah (xxxiv. 6) seems already to have in view (lxiii.)—be considered as an example of the way in which the threads of prophecy blend towards the close of the Revelation of John.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## THE ANGEL OF THE WATERS PRAISES GOD'S JUSTICE.

## REVELATION XVI.

THE great voice heard out of the temple (ver. 1) is the voice of God, as chap. xv. 8, and chap. xvi. 7, prove beyond a doubt. After the preparation of which we read in chap. xv. 1, 6-8, the command is positively given for the outpouring *the vials of God's wrath*, and this must have been done in quick succession, if not simultaneously, since, in ver. 11, the *noisome sores* are spoken of as enduring from the first to the fifth plague. These seven last plagues appear to have some reference to the plagues of Egypt, but they are not, for this reason, to be merely understood literally, as several commentators suggest. They precede the deliverance of the people of God, as the plagues of Egypt preceded the Exodus, but they especially affect the beast and his worshippers, his throne and his city, not merely natural objects in themselves. We find it difficult to decide how far these *vials of wrath* are to be understood physically (that is, literally) or figuratively, or as both together, but we incline to think that they have a double significance. For while their reference to the history of Egypt, and, still more, the actual retribution of blood for blood, would lead us to believe in a literal fulfilment; yet,

on the other hand, we have in ver. 13 the frogs used evidently as a figure, being explained as meaning unclean spirits, and the *sea* referred to would appear to be the same out of which the beast was seen to rise (xiii. 1). The mere fact of the parallel passages of the *sign in heaven*, in chap. xv. 1, and the *great wonder in heaven* of the woman, in chap. xii. 1; is not sufficient evidence to make us pronounce in favour of a merely figurative interpretation.

So much we must premise, in order to substantiate our view of the *angel of the waters*. If, indeed, with regard to this passage especially, we are sometimes tempted to doubt whether all the angels of the Apocalypse may not be merely prophetic images, we must at the same time remember that in the case of the similar visions of Daniel and Zechariah, such a theory is untenable, since there the actual personal appearance of Gabriel was repeatedly recorded. And if we have hitherto been right in interpreting John's visions as we did those of these older prophets, and assuming the real speech of real angels to be contained therein, we shall find that the angel of the waters may claim an actual and individual existence, as well as the seven angels with the trumpets, who, in chap. viii. 2, are very precisely described as standing before God, and the other seven with the seven golden vials. The question is thus reduced to one point only, namely, whether, in the passage we are now considering, we are, as many do (Grotius, for instance), to understand the third angel (ver. 4) to be the one described in ver. 5, to whom God had committed the execution of his sentence upon the waters. Now, there are many objections to such a theory. In the first place, it would lead us to see in ver. 3, as well as ver. 12, other angels of the water, three in all, whereas one only is

expressly mentioned, the other seven being rapidly enumerated in the original, as the first, second, third, the word *angel* being implied, not expressed. Again, we have, in chap. xiv. 18, the analogous position of the angel of the fire, and, in chap. vii., of the angels of the winds. Thus the angel of the waters in John's vision may have as real an existence as the angel who troubled the Bethesda pool, as recorded in John's Gospel. But further, this comparison of one passage with another leads us in no way to conclude that we have here the one only angel set over all the waters in the world, but rather one of many; one who, on this occasion, speaks in the name of *these* waters which have been turned into blood, as being appointed to have power over them, as an intermediate agent, in the same way that in chap. xiv. we read of the angel having power over the fire of wrath and judgment. And we may be very sure that if there were not, in point of fact, and in accordance with the very nature of our world, angels set over the winds, the fire, the water, John would not have adopted such as symbols. The only sense in which we can accept a figurative interpretation must always be one which assumes a fact as foundation for the figure, a reality beneath the type. Thus, under whatever symbolic disguise, we cannot doubt that it is a real *angel* who is speaking in this passage, and that he is in some way connected with the *waters*. More narrowly considered, this angel seems to be one set over the rivers and fountains of water named in ver. 4, and hence the plural, *angel of the waters*, in contradistinction to the sea, in ver. 3. Thus this usually beneficent ministering spirit, the angel of life-sustaining and salubrious fountains (as representative or director of many other such), bends low in acknowledgment of the justice of the Highest, which devastates his

originally healthful domain. And we see, further, that these last plagues exceed in terror those Egyptian ones that they so much resemble, insomuch as now not only the river, but the *fountains*, are corrupted, so that pure water can no longer be dug for, as in Exod. vii. 24.

“*Righteous art thou, which art and wast, the Holy One (or, thou Holy One), that thou hast judged thus.*”—Thus the saying of the angel should stand, if correctly rendered. It is not here necessary to add, “*which art to come,*” because the time of this coming in the last judgments is here anticipated; the words are spoken, as it were in their very midst. “Holy” is here the chosen epithet of praise, as elsewhere, but yet in a slightly varied sense, and the whole passage may be paraphrased thus: “Equally righteous in thy fierce judgments art thou, *the same* in all time, thou whose nature and property is first of all to be *holy, i.e., gracious.*”

Thus we discern here a very important and significant assurance of the close connexion, nay, the essential oneness of love and wrath in the holiness of God.

“*For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and blood hast thou given them to drink; they are worthy of it!*” In God’s judgments there ever prevails, but sometimes more evidently known and seen of all men, the great law of *Retribution*. As in chap. xviii. 6, we have cup for cup, so now, blood for blood (compare chap. xvii. 6; xviii. 24). As at the pouring out of the first vial of wrath, the noisome and grievous sore (perhaps inflicted on the very same place) answers to the brand of the mark of the beast, so in the case of the woman, as well as the beast, we have repeated what the Book of Wisdom (ch. xi. 5, 6) had already found true with respect to the plagues of Egypt. The pouring out of the blood of the saints like water had been

prophetically described in Ps. lxxix. ; now the image is to be reversed ; now the water is not only to be like blood, but, according to the precise text in ver. 4, we find that *they* (the rivers and fountains) *became blood*. But it is not added here : *as the blood of a dead man*, not clotted decomposed blood, for the transformed water spoken of in the present case is *water to be drunk*. And yet one might be justified in regarding ver. 4 as identical in meaning with ver. 3, and this giving them blood to drink an ironical way of expressing that what was wont to quench their thirst was now undrinkable—a figurative illustration of the horror of the pouring out of such a vial, which we, for our part, prefer. Finally, we have the abrupt, brief conclusion (without the *for*)—*they are worthy of it*, they deserve it,—a striking contrast to the same words (blessed words) used by Christ with regard to the faithful (iii. 4).

This exclamation of the angel has (as we constantly find in this book, both with regard to the words of angels and men) its confirmatory counterpart or echo in the words which John now hears proceed *out of the altar* (ver. 7) : “ Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments.” This, the voice evidently of the martyred saints under the altar (vi. 9, 10), is (being a voice of the sanctuary) attributed to the altar itself.

## CHAPTER XXV.

## THE ANGEL WHO SHOWS THE MYSTIC BABYLON.

## REVELATION XVII.

FOR the first time in the course of the Revelation of John, we meet with a continuous speech of the angel whose office it is to show and to explain; a speech containing the whole prophecy with which the prophet was inspired, as in the case of Daniel and Zechariah. This seventeenth chapter is perhaps the most important, certainly the most conclusive as to the character of the *whole*, that the Apocalypse contains, and we must limit ourselves to the consideration of its main features.

The judgments of Babylon, positively foretold in chap. xvi. 19, as well as warningly announced by the angel's cry in chap. xiv. 8, was only presented as fully accomplished to the seer in chap. xviii.; meanwhile, in conformity with the plan invariably maintained in this book, we have a vision intercalated in this preceding chapter, which he tranquilly beholds; only that on this occasion the accompanying speech of the angel enters specially into historical details, alluding retrospectively to certain events, as well as anticipating the details of the final evolution of others.

*One* of the seven angels which had the seven vials—the passage runs as does that in chap. xxi. 9. It is purposely left unspecified which angel it was, so that we must be



content not to attempt to decide with any certainty whether it was the first or the last, or the chief among them. But the probable theory really seems to be, that it was the seventh angel who now drew near, and detailed more fully what he had announced in chap. xvi. 19. However, the vague expression, "*one of the angels,*" leaves this, as we have said before, quite an open question, that the main point may alone occupy all our attention. For the *fact* that the seer announces, namely, that one of these mighty angels of the fierce wrath of God *talked with him*—confidentially, and as a friend, one favoured and consecrated, and deemed worthy to receive such revelation—is far more important than the exact description of the angel. The text goes on: "*Saying to me, Come hither; I will show unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth on many waters; with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication.*" The closer description of this degraded woman will come later, but we have a remark to make on the introductory sentence. The angel speaks this invitation "Come," with even stronger emphasis than the living creatures from the throne (chap. vi.); for he says, "Come hither," and also adds, with greater solemnity and fulness (instead of the mere word "see"), *I will show thee*, which was the language of the first voice (chap. iv. 1), with reference to the whole series of these visions. Thus we have, as it were, a fresh commencement made; and with this *showing*, an explaining and expounding is by implication promised. *The many waters* which John, according to ver. 15, appears to have *seen* without *understanding* their nature, evidently refer to the *sea* in a former vision (chap. xiii. 1), in which, as yet, only the beast, and

not the woman associated with him, was mentioned. That this *sea* means *peoples* the angel himself declares; and, indeed, throughout Scripture this symbol has run, and the restless raging and tossing of rebellious and sinful humanity been described under the image of the great deep, the outburst of which was the cause of the first destruction of a degenerate race. (See Isa. lvii. 20; Ps. lxxv. 8; lxxxix. 10, etc.) Even in the description of the typical Babylon the "many waters" are mentioned by Jeremiah (li. 13), with a hint at their real meaning.

"So he carried me (away) in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw." — This follows upon the promised showing. "In the *spirit*," as in chap. i. 10, and iv. 2, only in a renewed and exalted sense. But wherefore, we may ask, into a wilderness? Why not, as in chap. xxi. 10, on a great and high mountain? It may be suggested that we have here, as in Isa. xxi. 1 (comp. xiv. 23), the effect of the desolating judgment (ver. 16) prefigured. But yet this can hardly be, since the woman, as we shall presently see, is shown in all her might and splendour. A more simple reason seems more correct: it was in order that this vision might appear quite detached from chap. xvi., and also that it might be more distinctly seen; for as to the explanation that the woman, representing the Church of God, being left in the wilderness (xii. 14), this *degenerate* Church was also to be found there, will not satisfy us at all, since we cannot possibly assume the identity of these two women.

No doubt, it is true that the woman, with sun, moon, and stars, is the invisible; the harlot, the visible Church; or, to state the case more plainly and severely, the one is the true, the other the apostate Church. Still, the simplest explanation is best. John was placed in a desert, or

empty space, thence to contemplate from afar the woman shown to him; for he who would rightly judge of any object, must himself stand without it, and even in opposition to it.

That which John now *saw*, he described in a very graphic manner, before the angel spoke further in explanation, for the visions themselves speak "in the spirit" to the prophet, and expound themselves, so that, according to ver. 6, the seer actually *saw* that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints. We shall proceed to explain the purport of his vision, in so far as we comprehend it, with all brevity, before we apply ourselves to our special subject, the speech of the angel.

In chap. xxi. 9, 10, *the bride*, the Lamb's wife, is shown under the similitude of a city; here, on the contrary, where, from chap. xvi. 19, we are prepared to meet with a city, we have a woman, and she is a whore! Nay, on account of her many adulteries, she is called the *great whore* (in the same way we have great Babylon), in the most emphatic sense of the word. This adulteress is here placed in opposition to the bride of the Lamb, the woman clothed with the sun, who is the true Church—just as we have the beast contrasted with the Lamb—and she is to be understood in a quite general sense, as *the apostate and secularized Church*, otherwise she could not be also spoken of as a woman. It is very true that in the Old Testament Israel and Jerusalem appear most prominently as an adulterous wife,—three of the greater prophets, and one of the lesser, beginning their books with a declaration of the whoredoms of Israel (Isa. i.; Jer. i. ii. iii.; Ezek. ii.; Hos. i. ii. iii., to which we may add, Isa. lvii.; Ezek. xvi. xxiii., where Samaria is included, and many other passages). But Babylon, Nineveh, and Tyre appear under

the same character, with this addition, that they are like the woman here mentioned, specially charged with seducing the nations by their enchantments (Isa. xlvii. 23; xvi. 17; Nah. iii. 4); and, indeed, all these are alike included in the woman of the Apocalypse, the *false* city of God is become a Babylon. This woman sits on the *beast*, *i.e.*, the apostate Church has united itself with, and secularized itself by its union with the temporal power, which temporal power at first sustains and serves her, while she, for her part, wears the colour of the beast, till finally, in chap. xviii., we find only Babylon, and, in chap. xix., only the beast remains. No doubt, this beast "is the very same temporal power described by the seer in chap. xiii., but he wears now a different colour, and is, according to chap. xii. 3, more dragon-like in form" (Zeller). And whereas the woman enchants, intoxicates, and befools to the end with blasphemous hypocrisy, the beast finally makes a display of his brute force in open rebellion against God.

And now *who* is it, *who* is revealed in the vision, and still more accurately in the course of history, as this great whore? There is nothing that we hold more certain than that Rome is primarily meant, and certainly not heathen Rome, but the nominally Christian Rome in her decline and fall. And it is equally certain that the beast, according to the precedent in Daniel, can only be understood as a temporal power and kingdom. The seven hills (ver. 9), as well as the description in ver. 18, make the first conclusion inevitable.

But, on the other hand, it is no less certain that "the line of demarcation between the true and false Church is not a local one; no, nor one of mere confession of faith, that, in fact, there is no outward and visible line to be

drawn; the difference is a spiritual one, and must be spiritually judged of." Such is Auberlen's view, to which we would add a quotation from a different source: "We ought not too exclusively to look without and around our own selves in considering this subject. For within our hearts there may also be seated a like deluding influence, a mystic Babylon." Alas! an undue conformity to the world, a disloyal alliance made with the power and the deceitfulness of the prince of this world, is to be found in some degree in the majority even of those *people of God*, not merely without, but actually *within* the visible Babylon, who are here exhorted in chap. xviii., as well as in Isaiah and Jeremiah, and also by the apostle Paul in 2 Cor. vi., "Come out of her, my people."

*Scarlet colour* is that now assumed by the second beast in his full development (like that of the dragon, xii. 3), and he has also his seven heads and ten horns as the first beast had. But while we only read with regard to the first, that he had on his heads the name of blasphemy, the present beast, on the contrary, was *full of the names of blasphemy, i. e.*, full of blood-guiltiness and impiety. In conformity with him, the woman also is here represented as *arrayed in purple and scarlet colour*, which, taken in connexion with her being *decked with gold, and precious stones, and pearls*, represents no doubt in mortal eyes a haughty pomp and splendour; but to the all-seeing, all-discerning eye of God, stands rather for guilt, the guilt of blood (Isa. i. 18). Under a similarity of outward appearance, what can be more unlike than the royal pomp of the sanctuary and Satan's fiery red? What further removed than the papal scarlet and the red Republic, the bloody Revolution? What, again, can seem in stronger contrast than this revolution, and the despotism of a Napoleon?

Nevertheless, all hang together, the one contains within itself the germ of the other, and in due time makes way for it.

The *golden cup* full of (idolatrous) abominations and filthiness had already been pointed at (xiv. 8), and leads us back to Jer. li. 7. The strong delusions that seduce and inflame all who do not hold fast the love of the truth, are at the same time the intoxicating cup in the hand of Babylon, and the cup of wrath and judgment in the hand of God, who punishes sin by sin; yea, by giving men over to their sins. If, in 2 Thess. ii. 9, we read of a *mystery of iniquity* (in contradistinction to the *mystery of godliness*, 1 Tim. iii. 16, or of the faith, ver. 9), here we have it unveiled for the warning of believers. The name that in lieu of the seal of God is written on the *forehead* of the bold adulteress (of which she is herself unconscious, but which was shown to the eye of the seer), is in another sense a *secret name*, i. e., a symbolical, a typically prophetic name, not to be understood as the ancient Babylon. For this woman is the real, the peculiar *great Babylon*, above all former ones, the very climax of apostasy and arrogance, and, therefore, she is called *the mother of harlots and abomination of the earth*. There is a special reference here, no doubt, to the Catholic Church, sunk as it is in the elements of this world; idolatrous not only in her practice but her principles, she has the unenviable distinction of being the nearest realization of this scarlet woman, the metropolis of all such apostate and adulterous churches or communities.

This fearful form, riding upon the equally fearful beast, John saw, and the vision revealed its own nature to him, for he *saw her drunken with the blood of the saints, with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus!* Drinking is in itself a grievous sin, but it is infinitely increased by the hellish

nature of the intoxication in this case, the enmity against the saints, the persecuting of them even unto death. "What a disgusting spectacle is a drunken woman at any time! But how horrible if the drunkenness proceeds from human blood; how appalling if this blood be that of saints, and of the witnesses of Jesus!" (Zeller.) Therefore John *wondered* (was horrified, aghast), wondered with great admiration, even though he was in the Spirit! This is the only occasion throughout the whole series of his revelations on which he manifests any wonder. But behind the hideous spectacle lay a thought that made it more awful still! How fallen, how degenerate! Sunk to this depth—*this* woman now in the place of her who was clothed with the sun!

At this evident wonder of John's the angel who has shown him the sight, begins to utter his prophetic speech respecting the woman's further career, and the judgment that was to overtake her, which presupposes that John was already aware of as much as we have hitherto said on the subject, that is, he understood in a general way *who* this woman riding on the beast was. To which the angel now adds certain special, positively defining details, after the manner of those earlier prophecies in Daniel, to which these form the key.

We would here remind the reader of two things which appear throughout the Old and New Testament; first, that angels are conversant with future historical events, in so far as they are appointed in God's name to communicate them to us; and secondly, that they willingly condescend to adopt earthly symbols and figures of speech, which, indeed, are the only ones in which prophecy could be clothed, and the most many-sided medium of communication possible in the case.

“*Wherefore didst thou marvel?*”—This is not a question that requires an answer, neither is it a reproach or censure, but merely a customary form of human speech, intended to introduce the further details still to be given; it is tantamount to saying, “Yea, verily, there is more to marvel at yet.” First of all we had, “I will show thee;” now comes, “*I will tell thee,*” only, in the original the *I* is further emphasized. But that which the angel proceeds to say is, and must remain until the time of its accomplishment, in great part a mystery for us; we can only speak positively as to some of its more general features, which the progress of events has thrown some light upon; we even doubt whether the seer himself fully understood the meaning of the words he wrote down. The passage that occurs between ver. 8-11 has been truly named the most perplexing, most obscure in the whole Apocalypse; we can only venture, in deep reverence for the mysterious words of the lofty angel, to indicate some of their comparatively intelligible clauses.

With a very different wonder to that of John—such is evidently the train of thought here expressed—will *those that dwell on the earth wonder, whose names were not written in the Lamb’s book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast*, in the fullest display of his last greatness. Thus we are referred back to chap. xiii. 3, 8; the angel’s speech, although intended to reveal the *mystery of the woman and the beast*, yet beginning with the beast, because he is to be the agent in her final judgment. We have repeatedly, in the course of this book, met with this lofty name of “He that is, and that was, and that will be,” applied to God and to Christ; and here we have as it were a parody of it, applied in fearful irony to the false pretender, the Antichrist. For those



who are misled by mere first appearances, the lofty title given might even seem to transcend the Divine, the words being, "*when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and (nevertheless) will be.*" (Such is the correct rendering, not *yet is*, as in the English Bible.) But the angel himself had already revealed the truth; "*he was, and is not; and will ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition.*" Thus the appellation is rather the antithesis than the counterpart to Jehovah's name. The true distinguishing mark of the devil and all devilish things being, *he was, and is not*; he will indeed *come* again, but he will also *go*. Out of the bottomless pit into perdition! The fundamental idea is fearfully evident, but *how* this diabolical characteristic is to be disclosed by special historical events, remains as yet veiled in obscurity. We can, indeed, understand that the beast may already have *had* an actual existence, in pagan Rome with her world-wide sway; nay, long before her, in all the despotic empires and barbarous powers of antiquity. This suits well, on the whole, with the general description of the beast, and runs parallel with his *having been* and his *future return*, which latter fact we shall find (ver. 11) predicated of one individual king. At all events, this re-ascending out of the bottomless pit, of which we read in this chapter, is in no way to be confounded with the rising *out of the sea* (*i.e.*, peoples, ver. 15), and in order to prove this, let chap. xi. 7 be compared with the healing of his deadly wound, chap. xiii. 3.

"*The mind which hath wisdom*" (ver. 9) is, according to chap. xiii. 18, to be understood as an exhortation to consideration and inquiry, contained in this assurance that beneath the literal words there is something mysterious and important concealed. The seven heads have a double mean-

ing; this is a very notable feature in biblical images; the seven hills on which the woman (the great city, ver. 18) sitteth, signify also seven kings, kingdoms, powers, so that these seven hills of the harlot, these kings, resemble the seven heads of the beast.

On the whole, the only interpretation of the mystery that harmonizes with the rest of the prophetic Scriptures (chap. x. 7), appears to us as well as to some other eminent commentators, to be the following:—The five fallen powers (ver. 10), are the Assyrian, Chaldean, Persian, Grecian, and that of Antiochus Epiphanes. The Roman Emperor is the *one that is* (the sixth whom John enumerates); the seventh, he writes, *has not yet come*. To bring about the final and special fulfilment, however, which ver. 8 anticipates, we seem to have a repetition of this series of seven kings. So long as the beast still carries the woman, so long as the temporal power still serves the false church, the nature of the beast does not fully display itself, as it will do when *the beast himself*, as the eighth, appears with the seven, as the actual Antichrist, of whom Daniel (chap. xi.) and St. Paul (2 Thess. ii.) prophesy. This is to be a last undisguised, complete display of Atheistic power, imaged by the same daring wickedness, without idolatry, that preceded the deluge. We, as well as many others, are fully convinced that both here and elsewhere an individual, a personal Antichrist, as the final incarnation of anti-Christianity, is pointed at; but whether, as has been supposed, an *actual* arising of this person from the *dead* is meant, we for our part think very doubtful, especially from chap. xiii. 3, where it is said, that one of his heads was, *as it were*, wounded to death, which is quite compatible with the further announcement, that this *deadly wound was healed*. But as to *who* it is in the eleventh verse

of whom it is written, that he is *the eighth*, or *an eighth* and of the seven, this we acknowledge to be the very climax of the mystery, and beyond our power to solve.

The *ten kings* that appear in ver. 12, under the image of the *ten horns*, being expressly stated to *have received no kingdom as yet*, would seem to prefigure only vice-kings, and indeed, it is very probable that after the last great revolution, and the political changes to be brought about by the alliance of the woman and the beast, there may be a kind of confederation of ten powers, over which the beast will rule in his character of Antichrist. In ver. 16, correctly rendered, we read *the ten horns which thou sawest and the beast*, for the horns are not like the heads, which could not be thus spoken of as apart from him. The horns are powers subordinate to the beast (ver. 17), of which he will make use. In ver. 14, we have separate mention made of the *called*, and *chosen*, and *faithful*, for these are indeed three different degrees, first comes the call, then the preservation, then the reward of the fidelity unto death. (See chap. ii. 10.) Zeller says beautifully, in speaking of the triumph of the Lamb, and here we have a fulfilment of the saying: "The Christian triumphs in succumbing; the anti-Christian succumbs in its very triumph."

Next we see, that even as Jerusalem and Samaria were destroyed by those with whom in the language of Scripture they had committed spiritual adultery; even so the beast with his ten horns at length turns against the woman he had carried, hates and destroys her. "Each has used the other as a means to his or her own ends, and so they have come to ruin. In God's just judgments the one is ordained to punish the other, the seeming holy Church, through the seeming holy temporal power" (Zeller).

“*They shall make her desolate and naked,*” *i.e.*, they shall deprive her of the *peoples and multitudes*, those that streamed in and out of the city, they shall strip her of the pomp of her pride and the adornment of her hypocrisy. Will *eat her flesh* (in the original here, as in chap. xix. 18, the word is given in the plural, *her much or whole flesh*), *i.e.*, they will take possession of her rank and her property, attack all her ecclesiastical wealth, and finally, burn the dry bones of the still living victims with fire, *i.e.*, give her over to a shameful and well-deserved death, such as, according to Lev. xxi. 9, was the doom of the priest’s daughter, who profaned herself by unchastity. Since, however, the scarlet woman does not denote any individual, it is evident that this language is merely figurative, intended to convey a general idea of absolute ruin and extermination, although it is very possible, that in many particulars there may be an actual fulfilment of the very letter.

According to ver. 17, it is God who puts into the hearts of these ten last powers, this singular unity of purpose already alluded to in ver. 13, with which they accomplish the destruction of the Apostate Church, for although the spirit of hatred is not from God, yet he *overrules* its direction and manifestation, so as to bring about the events pre-determined by his will. The following sentence, *until the words of God be fulfilled*,—that is, according to chap. x. 7, the Scripture prophecies accomplished,—reminds us that this judgment executed by the beast upon Babylonian Rome, as described in chap. xviii., is not actually the *end*. Chapters xix. and xx. have still much more to reveal before the new heaven and the new earth are for ever established. But the last verse in chap. xvii. sets a final seal to that interpretation of the woman, which we have already spoken of, as, in our opinion, incontrovertible in the main,

*i. e.*, that John referred to the world-wide empire<sup>1</sup> of the Rome of his age ; in later times to develop into a despotism of another character, which should claim all the privileges of pagan Rome, nay more, and loftier, for the pseudo-Christian.

<sup>1</sup> Take for instance the inscription on the Golden Bull :—*Roma caput mundi regit orbis frena rotundi.*

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## THE TWO ANGELS AT THE FALL OF BABYLON.

## REVELATION XVIII.

WHEN we speak of the actual fall of Babylon, it must be evident that we understand by this the representation of it, as the last of a series of future events that had already been beheld by John in his vision,—events revealed to him as present by *anticipation*. We find in ver. 4, that the voice which summons the people of God out of Babylon, that they be not partakers of her sins, follows upon the repeated cry in ver. 2, *Babylon is fallen, is fallen*; and indeed throughout, we have the consciousness that, vivid as is the description, and apparently real and present the circumstances to the speaker's mind, yet that the whole chapter, from ver. 8, is in fact a prophecy of far-distant events.

The *other angel* who now appears in ver. 1, resembles the angels spoken of in chap. x. 1; but in conformity with the more immediate nature of his communication—dealing as it does more with outward events, and with these as more nearly impending—he is no more clothed with a cloud, but the earth is lightened with his glory, an expression almost literally resembling the passage in Ezek. xliii. 2, where the glory of the God of Israel on its way from the

east is spoken of. On this occasion, however, we have not merely the words, "another mighty angel," as in chap. x., but the same idea amplified,—*another angel, having great power. And he cried mightily with a strong voice*; or, as it might be even better rendered, "he cried in (his) strength, with a great voice." The purport of his cry very closely resembles those two clauses in chap. xi., telling of sin and punishment, which are now to be more fully opened out. In connexion with the latter, we are to have additional particulars of the desolate and desert state of Babylon after her fall; in connexion with the former, a more minute description is to be given of "all nations," as kings and merchants.

The increased *light* that accompanies this angel brings out not only the fact of the *fall*, itself the token of judgment and the proof of guilt, but reveals what had before existed concealed in the fallen city, shows her openly as the ghastly hold of foul spirits. Thus, in this last comprehensive announcement we have the key to the meaning of the old prophets in invariably particularizing, when speaking of the destruction and desolation of Babylon, Edom, Nineveh, the wild beasts and doleful creatures that would inhabit its ruins. "*Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!*" Thus runs the terrible angelic cry, "*And she is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.*" If, in the prophetic pictures to which we allude, there are mingled with the names of birds and beasts other words, whose twofold meaning points at spiritual existence, this is not to be expounded, as some commentators would suggest, as merely the result of Jewish superstition. We have high authority, in the chapter we are now considering, for recognising a reality beneath this so-called superstition. Here we have

unclean and hateful or predatory birds, such as owls, ravens, vultures spoken of, as well as still darker inhabitants. In their company, perhaps under their form, *demons* and *spirits* are also found inhabiting the desolate site, the heap of utter ruins; partly perhaps because of the preference of their reprobate nature, partly because the sentence passed upon them dooms them thereto (Matt. xii. 43). Whether, under this expression *demons*, there may also be prefigured the departed spirits of unclean men, we leave to the consideration of the reflective reader, but for our own part, consider it improbable. We may further observe, that in all such imagery as this, fraught, as it invariably is, with many-sided meanings and references, we may always trace a literal fulfilment, by the facts of earthly history, of the truths of a spiritual and invisible world; of which these facts are, as it were, the outward and visible sign. Here, for instance, we have the city described to us (ver. 2); then in ver. 3. there is a return to the metaphor of the degraded woman.

*“For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies.”* The threefold guilt of Babylon, in which she has involved the nations, may be described as apostasy or idolatry, the foundation of all the rest;—worldliness, taken in connection with its kindred influences;—pride, gluttony, luxury, in the misused possessions she has made instruments of sin. An inordinate delight in these perverted things is implied in the charge of fornication, as covetousness and over-reaching in the pursuit of selfish ends are implied in the allusion to the arrogance of the merchants. Ebrard is right: “It is not only the position of merchants, as such,



which is now indicated, but all that helps to promote the growth of luxury, and to occupy the heart entirely with earthly traffic and earthly gain."

The voice that in the following verse is heard from heaven, and which speaks from ver. 4 to ver. 20, does *not* proceed from an angel, whatever interpreters may have advanced on the subject. We are convinced that we have been right hitherto in receiving such *voices* as this, spoken of in the Revelation, as the voice of God himself; and here we have, in confirmation of our views, "*my people*," as in chap. xi. 3 we had "*my witnesses*." Nor is this view weakened by the fact, that in the long speech (as often occurs in the prophets), God is sometimes spoken of in the third person (ver. 5, 8), while sometimes the passage appears to be the description of a mere prophetic vision, for in John's mouth such expressions as those in ver. 6, 7, 20, would be quite out of place. Neither can we adopt Von Gerlach's suggestion, that *under the image* of the overthrow and desolation of a great, overgrown, rich, and proud city, at once capital and chief seat of trade, we are simply to understand the fall of the Antichristian spiritual power; for, as we have already explained, this spiritual power is represented as actually incorporated with a real *city*. Nor can we refrain from briefly pointing out here, how, according to ver. 6, 7, the children of God are to take part in her chastisement, if only by approving the sentence gone forth against her, or, perhaps, by actually invoking it, as in Ps. cxxxvii. 7-9. The closing words (ver. 20) are again taken from Jer. li. 48, so specially does the Spirit of prophecy delight to refer to its former utterances.

"*And a mighty angel*" (as in chap. v. 2) emphasizes his saying, by accompanying it with a visible action. He "*took up a stone like a great millstone, and cast it into*

*the sea, saying, Thus with violence shall that great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more.*"—Hence we see that even this is not the actual fall, but only the most precise and last announcement and representation of it that the seer is to receive, a concluding sign vouchsafed in confirmation of the truth of all that has gone before, such as was once given with regard to the destruction of the Chaldean Babylon (Jer. li. 43), by the throwing of a stone into the Euphrates. On the present occasion the symbol is more majestic; the stone is thrown into the sea (the flood of nations), and the fact of its being a *mill-stone* may have reference to the custom of drowning, by means of this weight, to which our Lord alludes (Matt. xviii. 6); thus reminding us of his threatened punishment to those who cause others to offend. Whether the fall of this stone into the sea denotes an earthquake, as in chap. xvi. 18, 19, cannot be positively known, but the still existent ruins of the city (ver. 2) would seem to argue that it does not. Enough, the great city *shall no more be found*, which means even more than the parallel passage in Deut. xiii. 16.

*"And the voice of harpers, and musicians, and of pipers, and trumpeters, shall be heard no more at all in thee; and no craftsman, of whatsoever craft he be, shall be found any more in thee; and the sound of a millstone shall be heard no more at all in thee; and the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee; and the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride shall be heard no more at all in thee."*—Most simple, most sublime, most poetical this rendering of the actual fact, in the tone and in the words of ancient prophecy. The apostle John, in his own human personality, had indeed no gift of eloquence equal to this, but the Spirit now takes possession of his mind as a vessel open and ready to receive it. The angel seems still to

see and hear, while the stone is falling, the many-sounding capital of the world ; addresses once more the city no more found in words of terrible wailing, as we might address a corpse, whose life and activity were over ; repeats the cry *no more* in five separate forms. Let this passage be compared with Isa. xxiv. 8 ; Jer. vii. 34 ; xvi. 9 ; xxv. 10 ; Ezek. xxvi. 13. Not only the sound of harp and song, flute and trumpet, but even the low grinding of the millstone (hand-mills were at that time used) would be over, as well as the light of a candle, necessary for the lowest domestic avocation, put out ! *All* is silent, all is extinct ! From the loudest tone of pleasure, to the lowest, all are included. Even the silent work of the craftsman must end, the little ray of his single candle be quenched. In Jeremiah the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride seems associated with festal voices of mirth and gladness, but here it seems to die down to a mournful murmur. All other sounds are over ; now there is no little spot left, no spot however dark (for all lights are quenched), where one loving pair even may whisper their farewell any more ; that faint sound, as well as the voice of musicians, shall be heard in her no more ; a fit close to the sorrowful beginning !

And now we have the *guilt* that has called down such a sentence again introduced, as in ver. 5, by the significant *for*. “ *For thy merchants were the princes of the earth ; for by thy sorceries (oh, great hall of enchantment) were all nations deceived !*” The Romish Babylon in her early state, still more in her latest, is full of art, pleasure, trade, and traffic ! There may be an allusion here to the spiritual traffickers in church wares of every kind (relics, indulgences), but there is also a literal exactness. According to Isa. xxiii. 8, the merchants of Tyre were princes, and her traders nobles of the land, and with a kind of play on

that fact, it is here even more strongly stated, *the* princes of the earth were at the same time *thy* merchants. Thus kings and merchants are classed together as in ver. 3; whereas, in ver. 9 and 11, they are only named in close succession. Finally, the spiritual unchastity is here spoken of as *sorcery*, sorceries (compare chap. ix. 21), in remembrance of Jezebel that early type (chap. ii. 20), of whose great enchantments and whoredoms we read in 2 Kings ix. 22.

“*And in her was found the blood of prophets, and of saints, and of all that were slain upon the earth.*”—This is the last, the most fearful portion of the funeral song over the condemned and annihilated city! The angel addresses *her* no more; his word now resounds *over* her! Some she misled and intoxicated, others she persecuted and slew. We read of the blood of the saints in chap. xvii. 6. Now, it is *found* in her as blood-guiltiness, discovered, fearfully avenged; as it was written in Ezek. xxiv. 8, of Jerusalem; Jer. ii. 34, of Israel; Jer. li. 35, of Babylon. Yea, in like manner, as the Lord spoke of Jerusalem (Matt. xxiii. 35), so in this case *all* the murders, all blood-guiltiness whatever on earth, shall be required of this great Babylon.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## THE ANGEL REFUSING TO BE WORSHIPPED.

## REVELATION XIX.

THERE is a good deal of apparent difficulty in distinguishing to whom the different voices, in this chapter, belong, whether to angels, or to spirits of just men made perfect, or to a still higher source; but with careful consideration we shall be able to solve this difficulty. The connexion between it and the preceding chapter is especially clear. As Herder has observed, after the very last and lightest sound in great Babylon has been hushed: "All around and above her there is a silence like that of the grave, she has sunk out of sight and is no more found, though her smoke ascends for ever; the song of lamentation dies away, a heavenly strain of triumph is heard." According to the behest of the angel (xviii. 20), heaven rejoices over her, that is to say, the avenged saints in heaven. Thus the *much people* whose *great voice* we hear (xix. 1-3), are (as, indeed, ver. 2 further proves) the same who cried for judgment in chap. vi. 9, 10; and, finally, the same who are named (xviii. 24) as those whose blood was found in Babylon; with which accords also, in a general way, chap. xi. 15. This is the only place in the whole New Testament where the solemn hallelujah occurs (but here

it occurs four times), which we hear for the first time in the Old Testament, Ps. civ. 35, after the declaration of the wicked being consumed. Now comes the fulfilment of chap. vi. 10, after the Church in heaven, as well as the Church on earth, has long cried in the language of Ps. xciv., "Lord God, to whom vengeance belongeth, show thyself!" Now He has avenged the blood of his servants, according to His promise of old (Deut. xxxii. 43). Another hallelujah rises from the same multitude over the just *eternity* of the sentence past, the smoke of the torment of the ungodly honouring God after its kind, as does the incense of the praises of the blest; nay, more, only they who can sing hallelujah over it are worthy of eternal blessedness! In ver. 4, this is confirmed by an Amen added to the hallelujah, spoken by the four-and-twenty elders, and the four beasts, who fall down and worship *together* on this occasion, so that these words are not *peculiarly* the language of angels. We have, indeed, seen the elders fall down thus on two former occasions, but it is only here, and in chap. v. 8, that the living ones, living creatures, or beasts, fall down with them.

But whose is the voice we meet with in ver. 5, the *voice coming out of the throne*? Is it that of the Spirit piercing through the very seat of Deity? We, for our part, do not think so; we hold, rather, that verses 1-4 contain the words of the blessed dead, *i.e.*, the elders, together with those of the beasts, whereas ver. 5 is spoken only by the four living creatures that bear up the throne; and lastly, that ver. 6 includes the *whole* multitude of all God's servants in heaven, answering the call made upon them by ver. 5 to praise God, by a voice like that of the many waters of earth and the thunders of heaven, bursting out into a fourth grand and united *Hallelujah!* To which is

immediately joined (ver. 7) the further announcement that the marriage of the Lamb is come, another cause for the universal gladness and rejoicing of heaven. The mystic Babylon thus made place for the true bride, the wife who has made herself ready! And now we have in ver. 8 John's own words, describing what he actually himself saw and understood, and could explain to his readers, the fine linen, white and clean, the pure, shining, priestly apparel, in contrast to the blood-red vesture of the condemned harlot.

Thus, then, all appears to be intelligible, and we come to the ninth verse, where, for the first time in this chapter, we have the voice of an *angel*, whose words are introduced by the indefinite but frequently occurring phrase, "*and he saith unto me.*" Many have considered that this was the same angel whom we saw come down from heaven (xviii. 1), but his office evidently ended with the judgment of Babylon, and we hold it more probable that it is the one described in chap. xvii. as one of the seven, who now proceed to say, "*Write! Blessed (are) they who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.*" And with the emphasis of a fresh beginning, "he saith unto" John again, "*These are the true sayings of God.*" The repeated instruction to write was necessary for the wholly entranced seer, wholly participating and absorbed as he must have been in the marriage gladness of heaven. Accordingly, the dictation of a lofty speech is prefaced by this *Write*, just as in chap. xiv. 13 the same ascription of blessedness to those who die in the Lord was to be written down. But we cannot think that this passage is to be understood as the antithesis to the other, as referring to the blessedness of those who are found alive at Christ's coming, in contradistinction to that of the dead who died before it,

for *both* are alike called to the marriage (1 Thess. iv. 15), both are to be there. The called mean the *invited*, that is, the wedding-guests, so that we see the guests and the bride are one. Here, as in chap. xvii. 14, we have it implied that these called were not called in vain, but that they obeyed the call, were *called* and *chosen* and *faithful*. But we have also a general encouragement and exhortation contained in this reference to the universality of this call. The wedding proclaimed in ver. 7 is indeed only actually to take place, chap. xxi. 2, but after the decisive victory over Babylon, the glad event is so much nearer that it is spoken of as at hand, as already come, for so, indeed, in a certain sense, it is brought before the eyes of those invited by the very first call they hear. O that we had more faith in the truth of God's words, so that we might by anticipation enjoy their certain fulfilment more than we do! To this the angel exhorts us expressly, by this assertion, "*These are the true sayings of God.*" We have here an almost certain proof that it is the angel of chap. xvii. who is speaking here, for these words sound like an echo of those he made use of in ver. 17, "*until the words of God shall be fulfilled,*" with which we may compare the after assertion of the intermediate speaker in chap. xxi. 5. These sayings of God which are to be fulfilled, mean here (as in chap. xvii., though with a slight difference) not only, though primarily, the *promises* through which we are called, invited, and encouraged. The judgment and condemnation of unblest souls are also inevitably included, but the true end and aim of the whole purpose of God is joy, holiness, happiness for ever.

John now falls down at the feet of the angel to worship him. Some commentators have singularly enough supposed that John was under the impression that this was the close



of the Revelation, and thus desired reverentially to return thanks and take his departure. But no; he must have known how much of judgment and glory still lay behind. Auberlen's suggestion deserves more attention when he attributes to the seer at this juncture a quite overwhelming emotion. "This outward expression of a spirit deeply moved, is a characteristic contrast to the great wonder that John had evinced (xvii. 6). When the destiny of God's Church is concerned, the seer cannot withhold his intense sympathy, he wonders with profound amazement at her deep fall, he worships at the tidings of her future glory." To which we might add, with somewhat more precision, that the childlike spirit of John must have been even more penetrated with joy, by the certainty that *he himself* was one of the called, than by the announcement of the glory of the Church as a whole. As though the blessed fact—though indeed known long ago—now burst upon him for the first time in all its magnitude, he is ready to worship the angel who confirms it; in the same way—let us be permitted the homely simile—as a child long absent from his father's house, might kiss the hand of one of his father's servants who came commissioned to convoy him home.

But the angel rejects his worship, and says, "*See (thou do it) not! I am thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God.*" In the same manner that we find Peter refusing to allow in Cornelius the prostration which had been customary in eastern countries, because it was no longer in accordance with the new dignity and liberty Christianity conferred, we find the angel who converses with John twice reminding him (here and in chap. xxii.) that in the presence of angels, man, the worshipper of God alone, was to be conscious of his own dignity as their fellow-creature and fellow-servant.

Nay, the actual wording of the passage implies even more; not thou art *my* fellow-servant, but *I am thine*. This reminds us of ver. 5, "Praise our God, all ye his servants." Let it be observed that the angel very wisely avoids saying, I am thy brother, for these heavenly servants are not the children of God in the same full sense that we men are, and also their difference of nature forbids that fraternal relationship which one human being bears to the other. The precision of this scriptural language is often improperly overlooked and passed over. "Thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren;" this, no doubt, means all human beings that serve and worship God, but refers here more especially to believers in Jesus, disciples such as John himself. We shall see presently what is meant by the testimony of Jesus; but we must here observe that the angel's address is equivalent to saying, 'I also, as thou and all those like-minded with thee, only testify of Jesus,' which was indeed the especial office of the heavenly fellow-servant on this occasion. Worship *God* alone! And truly this fundamental, this earliest lesson that we learn as children in our catechism, is one that we need to have repeatedly recalled to us all our lives long, lest in our thoughtlessness or precipitation we practically forget it. More especially in the last times, when the last assembling of the guests called to the wedding takes place, there is need for peculiar stress being laid on this great truth (as in chap. xiv. 7, at the proclaiming of the everlasting gospel) in opposition to the teaching of them who worship the beast and demons, and the work of men's hands (ix. 20). This warning to the seer is given for our learning.

The additional explanatory clause that follows is written by John, not spoken by the angel; *For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*, which is a parallel passage to

the intercalation by him in ver. 8. According to chap. vi. 9, and xii. 17 (a similar idea being also conveyed, chap. xx. 4), this testimony of Jesus is by no means confined to the prophets, but equally attributed to all believers who have borne witness to Jesus by suffering and death for his sake. And now here we have the testimony defined as the spirit of prophecy! How can this be? Are all evangelists, witnesses, and confessors prophets too? The inquiry is natural, but the answer too is evident enough, and has been given long ago by our best commentators. Von Meyer, for instance, writes: "In order that we may not doubt that all true Christians are granted some share of a holy and divine insight, be it ever so weak and clouded, we are expressly told that the testimony of Jesus is (in itself) the spirit of prophecy." This does not, indeed, mean that we are all actual prophets, gifted with an unerring faculty of prediction, but that the Spirit will open out for us the meaning of already existing prophecies, in so far as we require to know it; always, at all events, with regard to their fundamental idea and main application, without which degree of understanding there can be no faith, properly so called, in God's word. And in the latter days, this is to hold good, especially with regard to the prophecies of the Apocalypse. "The spirit of *understanding* of these will afford the children of God a comfortable evidence of their belonging to Jesus" (Ebrard). But more than this, it may be said, that he who can understand and expound prophecy virtually prophesies himself; having the indwelling light of God's word in his heart, and seeing alike present and future things in this light. The testimony of Jesus is, as Hamann well observes, "the Holy Spirit, with his heavenly faculty of vision, not the polity of the

beast and the scarlet woman, nor mere scholastic and critical learning." And thus we are not only fellow-workers, but on an equality with angels, who have a commission to unfold the future things of the kingdom of God, inasmuch as *we*, through our Lord Jesus, by means of faith, regeneration, and heavenly illumination of the Spirit, have positively a certain spirit of prophecy with regard to these subjects. Lastly, in order thoroughly to appreciate the truth of this saying, in which John modestly enrolls himself amidst the rest of the brethren, we must invert it, and read, "*The spirit of prophecy is the witness of Jesus.*" This is what Hamann does, and he then proceeds to observe : " This rule serves as corner-stone to the whole of Scripture, and must be the touchstone of all expositors." Yea, verily, the whole mystery of God, which he has made known to his servants the prophets, is grounded on, and fulfilled in the person and kingdom of Jesus, it has for its final goal the marriage of the Lamb ; and, accordingly, the very least Christian, to whose heart witness is so borne to Jesus by the Holy Ghost, that he, on his part, can also bear witness to him, has more of the understanding, light, power, and spirit of prophecy in him, than all those learned ones, who are learned merely in the letter of the Bible.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ANGEL IN THE SUN SUMMONING THE BIRDS  
TO THE GREAT SUPPER.

REVELATION XIX.

THE book of Revelation unfolds to us a threefold judgment,—that of Babylon, of the beast with the false prophet, and of Satan. The second of these judgments will be executed, according to 2 Thess. ii. 8, by the immediate power of the Lord himself coming as conqueror, which appearance (ver. 11-16),—his so-called second coming,—will occupy a middle position between his first coming as the man of sorrows and his last coming to judgment,—a truth that we have now more plainly revealed than heretofore, but on which the plan of our present book does not permit us to dwell. Visible in his majesty, and accompanied by all the armies of heaven, the Lord himself now actually appears to John, in token that this vision approaches more exactly to reality than has hitherto been the case. The final defeat of Antichrist and his armies is, no doubt, in a measure effected by both heavenly and earthly instruments of the divine will; but it is mainly to be ascribed to the Lord's appearing, to the sharp sword that goeth out of his mouth, *i.e.*, to the rapidly executed word of his power.

But before the great slaughter that lays the hosts of

Antichrist low, we have, in a typical vision, an invitation to supper given to a strange and ghastly company of guests, in verbal conformity with the prophecy in Zeph. i. 7: "The Lord hath prepared a sacrifice; he hath bid his guests." John now sees an angel *standing in the sun*; that is, with the brightest glory imaginable (greater even than the glory described in xviii. 1), proclaiming his great message all over heaven, and crying to all the fowls that fly in its midst: "*Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God; that ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, free and bond, both small and great.*" The giving the flesh of the conquered to the fowls of the air and the beasts of the land, is an ancient form of speech that very often occurs in Scripture. (See Deut. xxviii. 26; 1 Sam. xvii. 44; Jer. vii. 33; also Jer. xii. 9, properly rendered.) But the angel's cry resembles more especially the expression used by Ezek. xxxix. 4, 17-20, from which we have another quotation in Rev. xx. 8. The whole passage in the old prophet, no doubt, has an ultimate reference to Antichrist, inasmuch as all judgments prophetically mirror each other; but it is here much abbreviated, and yet there is an addition made to it, *i.e.*, the enumeration of free and bond, small and great, in allusion to chap. xiii. 16, as well as vi. 15.

But the most striking new feature here, is the appalling expression, the great supper of God, in fearful contrast to the marriage supper of the Lamb. "It is a sad necessity," says Herder; "first an impure feast of birds, before the pure and glad feast of the bride of the Lamb can take place." This is the treading out of the vine of the earth, this is the great battle of Armageddon

(xvi. 16). The birds may typify the angels of wrath and judgment like that *eagle* which we have before heard croak out his threefold woe, or perhaps swarms of barbarians, or more probably the expression has an actual reference to birds of prey as well, who will here eat flesh for the last time before the thousand years come, when all creation shall be made new. Thus the kings of the earth and their armies, great as their gathering round the beast have been, to make war with him against the King of kings and Lord of lords, against the Lamb whose supper and whose love they have despised, will now experience the wrath of that same Lamb, will form a supper or banquet to vultures and other carnivorous birds, who will sate themselves with their flesh, "while their souls are the sport and prey of evil spirits." For although this last fact is not expressly declared, it looms darkly in the background of this terribly significant picture.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

## THE GREAT VOICE OUT OF HEAVEN.

## REVELATION XXI.

THROUGHOUT the twentieth chapter the prophetic vision of future events is seen, described, and written down by the seer himself. No other voice, no words of the angels are heard; it is true that an angel does come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit, and a great chain destined for Satan in his hand; but Satan is bound before the eyes of John, and cast into the abyss without an audible word. The earthly instruments of the great adversary having all been done away with, the last triumph over the devil, alone and powerless now, is easier than any former, as is very evident. After the thousand years are over, he is to be loosed out of prison again to deceive the nations, but there are no explanatory details vouchsafed respecting the last conflict and last victory. Only we read at its close, of eternal torment for Satan and all his angels; of the last judgment of all the dead; of the new heaven and the new earth. The millennial reign, and the final and eternal glory, which, in the two last chapters, are treated of together, are here spoken of as separate epochs. Chapters xxi., xxii. speak only of the completely new and eternal *last* dispensation; of all that went before it is said, *It is done!* The new earth, one with the new heaven, has, in-



stead of its vanished sea, the stream of living water that proceedeth out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

Here then our feeble exposition would willingly give place altogether to the simple sublimity and unfathomable profundity of the words of the holy text itself, but still we are bound, in so far as we are able, to continue it to the end. After John's vision, and *vision only*, in chap. xxi. 3, we once more hear a great voice *out of heaven*, or as it might perhaps be even more correctly rendered, *out of the throne* (as in vi. 6; xvi. 1; xix. 5). That it cannot be the voice of the Lord Jesus himself is made clear by ver. 5, which introduces Him that sat on the throne as beginning to speak. Neither can it be the voice of the blessed dead, who are now inhabitants of the holy city, for there is reference made as from above to the tabernacle of God with men, and also it said, "God shall be *with them*, shall be *their* God." Shall we abstain entirely from pronouncing on the nature of this voice, as we did with reference to those in chap. vi. 6? Not so, for we believe that we have here another angelic utterance, though whether it be that of one or more angels we must not venture to decide. The voice utters most inexpressibly glorious words, rising even higher than ver. 1, 2; discovering profounder depths; still more clearly connecting the end of God's ways with the beginning of his gracious purpose. Here is their first clause: "*Behold, the tabernacle of God shall be with men, and he will dwell with them, and God himself shall be with them, their God.*"

This is the last (with its eternal emphasis surviving all the rest), the last "*Behold*" we hear from angels' lips. As the New Jerusalem borrows its eternal name from its earthly and typical, as a memorial of the beginning, so also the actual fulfilment, the true *tabernacle*, the perfect temple is

here not once called a temple; nay, in ver. 22 it is expressly said, that there is no temple in the city, because she herself is become the *tabernacle*, the almighty God in the person of the Lamb being its Holy of Holies, to whom there is constant access. As early as chap. xiii. 6, we meet with a deeply significant sentence respecting the *tabernacle* of God, or his indwelling through the Holy Spirit. This one perfected tabernacle and city is something more than the temple that we have hitherto seen opened in heaven to the gaze of the seer as the archetype and antitype of Israel's earthly sanctuary (Heb. viii. 2; ix. 11-24). It is the continuing city spoken of in Heb. xiii. 14; xi. 10-16), and more, the habitation of God as described under the New Testament. Von Meyer observes in connexion with this subject:—"Only when the inner and outer life perfectly correspond will a third and complete dispensation be entered upon. In the second dispensation (the present or New Testament dispensation) there is only a spiritual temple without any external form or comeliness, while on the other hand that of the Old Testament was incomparably costly. For its external aspect typified the splendour of the glorified temple, and its sacred services, the spirituality, grace, and truth of both succeeding dispensations, which are indeed essentially one, the spiritual influences of the former being the type of the full perfection of the latter."

It is to *this* goal that all tends from the very beginning. The indelible yearning for fellowship with God which existed in man from the hour of his creation, and even survived his fall—that tendency which the lost criminally extirpated from their nature—finds here its satisfaction, its rest, its accomplishment. *This* is the spiritual sense of the *measure of a man* (v. 17). Redeemed humanity is not merely

a people—the one people gathered out of all nations ; but it resembles one glorified man in whom God dwells. At the same time, though this is meant, the expression used is not *in* them, but *with* them, in order that the last may be linked with the earlier prophecies. How many a time throughout the whole Old Testament have the words that sound out here been applied to the dwelling of God with man : he their God ; they his people (refer especially to Ex. xix. 6 ; xx. 24 ; Lev. xxvi. 12 ; Jer. xxiv. 7 ; xxx. 22, xxxi. 1, 33). But it is in the prophet Ezekiel, above all, that such expressions are found. Compare chap. xxxvii. 27, with xlvi. 35. We must not overlook the New Testament echo (2 Cor. vi. 16), which refers to the spiritual fulfilment of these precious promises. But now, observe how free from all envy is the joy in heaven over *all* the saved, all the *found* again, the joy with which the holy angels humbly proclaim the preference given to *men*. It is *they* who are God's people, who are God's dwelling. In Rev. vii. 15, we had the expression (rightly rendered) "dwell over them ;" now, it is "*with* them ;" it is a complete indwelling, in which body and soul share. The glorified earth is the home of the great body of saints who alone are called *men* now. The lost are put out of sight, have lost the very name of men, are in the lake of fire with devils. Now the holy name of Immanuel is indeed fulfilled. He who bore it will be *God with them*, as *their* God in the fullest sense of the word.

As yet, it has been truly said by Zeller, "there is nowhere on earth a perfect people of God, nowhere on earth a perfect church of God ; yea, not one single perfect man of God to be found on the earth." Moreover, we so little apprehend the *positive* nature of full communion with God, of perfect blessedness and glory, that the heavenly voice pro-

ceeds negatively to describe it, making it in some measure intelligible to us under the aspect of an immunity from earthly woes. "*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes ; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying ; for the former things have passed away.*" In chap. vii. 17, we had the same melodious strain. The passages in the old prophets most closely resembling it are Isa. xxv. 8 ; xxxv. 10 ; lxx. 19. We are also reminded of Ps. cxxvi. 5 ; 1 Cor. xv. 55. Alas ! how many tears which we have no power to wipe away for ourselves, must still be wept, before the former things are thus completely done away with. Sin has brought in death as climax of all sorrow ; grace has conquered death, and swallowed it up in the triumph of an eternal existence. If *all* tears (literally and emphatically *each* tear) is to be entirely wiped away, the promise at the same time conveys a satisfactory future conviction of their necessity, their utility in ripening the good seed for the harvest. Were it not so, there would remain some sting of sadness in the very memory of sorrow. But *all* tears are to be *wiped away* ; the often spoken *weep not* at length has all its Divine power and efficiency, includes even all tears of melancholy and of *yearning*—those "tenderest buds of the tree of sorrow." The *memory* indeed remains, of the way through much tribulation to glory ; but there is no longer any pain in the memory, only the thanksgiving and praise and joy of salvation, only a looking back to the way, as what indeed it ever was, "a way through a sea of *mercies*."

Are we, however, in opposition to the testimony of the Word of God on the subject, still anxiously to surmise that at least compassion and sorrow for the lost must trouble the blessedness of the blest, so long as there still is a lost condition ? Or shall we be wise above that which is

written, and comfort ourselves with the idea of a universal restoration, as many dear children of God have done: Von Meyer, for instance, who persists in that opinion, and writes with respect to this passage: "It is nowhere said that this lost estate is the very last of all." Rather, we hold that throughout Holy Scripture it is so said, that the actual end is described, as well as the actual beginning. Even in the Revelation of John everlasting misery is incontrovertibly established, especially in the two last chapters (see chap. xxi. 8; xxii. 15). But the saved will learn to say, "Amen, hallelujah," over the judgments of God, when God himself in all his holiness and justice dwells within them, and this great truth is implied in the very words we have been considering.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## THE INTERPOSING VOICE

## REVELATION XXI.

HERE I have only to insert what I have already written elsewhere, respecting the closing speech from the throne (ver. 5-8), in order to distinguish from it the interposing voice, which comes within my present province. He who sitteth on the great white throne (before whom the earth and the heavens fled away, xx. 11) the Lord of glory himself, has begun to speak, his words being introduced by another *Behold*, which explains the *Behold* of the foregoing great voice: "I have done it, I do, I make, I work *all things new.*" *All!* not only the city, but heaven and earth as well. Now, why should John interrupt the high sayings of the Highest, mutilate them by a twice recurring "*And he said unto me,*" if the speech were all one? We cannot suppose that he would have done this; nay, the very words themselves that form the second clause in ver. 5, and which we are about to consider, do not seem appropriate, coming from *Him* who is himself yea and amen, and who has just announced the final accomplishment of all. Does it appear probable that having done this, he would intercalate here the assurance that his words are true? Now, we have once before received a similar assurance from the

mouth of an angel (xix. 9), and we shall again hear the same for the third time from the last angelic speaker, in chap. xxii. 6. Nothing more natural, therefore, than that we should, on the present occasion, read and understand, *And he said unto me* (interposing, as it were), *he* being the angel whom we read of in chap. xix. 9, whom we assume to have been present with John ever since, his words being succeeded by another utterance from the speaker on the throne; to whom John refers, when, in ver. 6, he writes, "And he said unto me."

"*Write! for these words are true and faithful;*" not, as some have proposed to render it, write *that* these words are true and faithful, as indeed the comparison of the three parallel passages shows. And also the repeated injunction, *Write* (uttered by the Spirit, chap. xiv. 13; and by the angel, xix. 9) stands out here for the third and last time, with a difference of expression. Whereas in chap. xix. 9 it was simply said, "These are the *true* sayings of God;" both here and in chap. xxii. 6 we have the phrase intensified with respect to the last and highest promises; they are said to be *faithful* (certain, worthy of all confidence and acceptance) *and true*. O that the faith of all of us might so lay hold on their truth as to have experience of their reality!

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## THE ANGEL SHOWING THE BRIDE.

## REVELATION XXI.

As an additional proof that we have been correct in believing the saying in chap. xix. 9 to be that of the angel who first appeared in chap. xvii. 1, and has been present ever since, we have the repeated description, "One of the seven;" and not only so, but to make it still more plain to our comprehension, it is added, "Who had the seven vials *full of the last seven plagues.*" This reference to the former passage proves plainly that it was the same angel, and his words are in perfect harmony with the assumption.

"*Come hither, I will show thee the Bride, the Lamb's wife*"—"I will show her thee more closely and more precisely than thou hast yet seen her;" for already, in ver. 2, John had not only seen the city, but recognised her as a bride adorned for her husband. The very same angel of wrath and judgment who showed the great whore of Babylon now shows the Bride. As it has been well observed, "The minister of wrath is to be a minister of grace as well. But everything must take place in due order. The bride cannot appear till the vials of wrath have first been poured out. The angel who showed the mystic Babylon is also to show the bride; the mystery of Christ cannot be known unless



the mystery of Antichrist is known also. We must be equally ready to receive truth of every kind."

If the mystic Babylon was spoken of as *a woman, the woman*—with reference to that covenant with the Lord, which she had adulterously broken—so now *the bride, the adorned and prepared*, is already spoken of as a wife, because the marriage of the Lamb was come (xix. 7), and also according to the custom of the Jewish law, which considered the betrothed as actually married (Matt. i. 19, 20; Gen. xxix. 21). In the case of the great harlot, we had the vision of a woman explained as a city; here, however, we have no female semblance of the bride, for the *holy city* is a bright and certain reality, which can and ought to be more openly prophesied than the dark mystery of Babylon. It was in a desert that the seer beheld the latter; it is from the top of a great and high mountain that his eye now rests upon the New Jerusalem. It has been asked whether the city of God was actually itself on the mountain, or whether it was only beheld from thence; while others, again, have chided the question as irrelevant to such a subject, and as removing it out of its holy and supernatural, to our everyday sphere. As though the promised, the revealed city for which we wait, had not as actual an existence as that of the new heavens and new earth!

We must not merely spiritualize the text, use it as an illustration, say, as it has been said, "In order to behold the city of God you must elevate yourself; you must leave the mists of the valley; the mountain that you must ascend is that of *faith*." No doubt this is a truth, but to such a question as that proposed we prefer to answer that the primary meaning of the passage seems indeed to be that John was raised on the great mountain in order to look *into* the holy city, not merely to have it spread out before him; but

beneath this statement there is also another fact—which we cannot indeed deduce solely from the use of the word *mountain* in this place, but from many other passages in Scripture, as well as from the cubic measurement, given in ver. 16, of the city—the fact, namely, that the city, rising as it does from earth to heaven, uniting both, must be a city set on a hill, resembling its type, the hill of Zion. And indeed, in Ezekiel xl. 2, of which we are here reminded, not only by the mention of the mountain but the measuring-reed, we have it very positively stated that the “frame of the city” was set upon a very high mountain. All that follows, however—regarding which it is only once said in ver. 22, *I saw*, and in chap. xxii. 1, *he showed me*, as well as the hint in chap. xxi. 15, that the angel who *showed* also *talked with John*, explaining or visibly bringing before him,—all this refers to the last, the eternal tabernacle of God with men, and no longer to the Jerusalem of the millennial reign (chap. xx. 9 having quite a different meaning from chap. xxi. 2). But it is quite consistent with this view to suppose that the earthly New Jerusalem, as the *last type*, may have, though in a less degree, many of the distinguishing features of the Eternal City.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## THE LAST ANGELIC SPEECH.

## REVELATION XXII.

PROPERLY speaking, this closing chapter should begin with ver. 6. The angel who now addresses John is the one who had, in the former chapter, and in chap. xix. 9, asserted the truth and faithfulness of the words of God. This assertion he here repeats for the third time. To what words, it may be inquired, does this angel refer? In the first place, no doubt, the reference is to what John has seen, and been commanded to write, concerning the marriage of the Lamb, the new heaven and the new earth, and the glory of the eternal city. But this is not all; we have a final declaration made here of the truth and faithfulness of *the whole book*, of *all* the Revelation of John, which, in spite of the doubt and opposition that of late have increasingly assailed the Christian's faith on this head, certifies to us its divine origin. Harms, preaching on the close of this book, observes, "Here and there it always has been and still is the means of awaking some hitherto careless soul, who, being attracted by certain words of incontestable value and beauty, says to himself, 'Since I find this there, all the rest, proceeding as it does from the same source, must also be true, for truth and falsehood cannot go together.'"

The general nature of the expression here used by the angel, "*these sayings*," is in harmony with his first assertion (xix. 9, "*the true sayings of God*"), and further enforced by his now going on to say: "*And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to show unto his servants the things which must shortly be done.*" We find Moses describing the Almighty as the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh (Numb. xxvii. 16; xvi. 22; compare Job xii. 10). Here we have a more restricted and exalted description, referring to the manifestation of the Spirit of God in the prophets. For although the same Spirit dwells and works in them all (1 Pet. i. 11; 2 Pet. i. 21), yet in the same way as the breath of God individualizes itself in the persons and spirits of humanity at large, so we read of separate and various spirits of the prophets (1 Cor. xiv. 32). Again, in this comprehensive conclusion of the whole book, we have another and clearer proof afforded us of what had already been brought forward, in what we called the general quotation, in chap. x. 7. We are taught that in *these* words, "the words of the prophecy of *this book*" (ver. 7, 10), God has comprehended *all former prophecies*, has united all the spirits of the old prophets in this latest, this final utterance. In testifying this great truth, the angel verbally refers to the expression at the commencement (chap. i. 1), or rather John, who only began to write after the conclusion of the visions seen and voices heard, borrowed that expression from these last angelic words. Nor does it necessarily follow that the angel *sent by God* was actually the angel speaking at the time (one of the seven), who, in this case, would be speaking of himself. Had this been the case, it is most natural to conclude that he would have simply said, "The Lord God sent me." The other ex-

planation which we would attach to the angel especially named *the angel of the Lord Jesus, i.e.*, the message, the announcement, appearance, and revelation of the Lord, agrees well with the tenor of the sentence. One of the *personal* angels, in speaking, designedly uses this distinguishing word, *his*, to teach us the difference between himself and "*this angel*" of the Lord God. "*To show unto his servants.*"—In a general sense, these are all the brothers and fellow-prophets with John, who are enlightened by means of this prophecy, and themselves prophesying, or having a clear insight into what is shortly to come to pass, *shortly to be done*, as we read in the very first verse of this book.

"*Shortly,*" this is to be understood like the words, "I come *quickly*," and that other expression, "The time is *at hand*," according to the prophetic standard, and the prophetic sight. All that *is* to come, *will* come,—all events ordained to come to pass will rapidly follow each other in their necessary sequence of cause and effect. Very rapid indeed is the course of time to the mind of the seer, fixed, as it is, on the revealed horizon of eternity.

In the opinion of many, it is the same angel who goes on speaking in ver. 7, *i.e.*, says in the *name of Jesus*, "Behold, I come quickly." But we must repeat our former explanation, and point to the frequent change of persons and of voices throughout the whole of this closing chapter. Nor can we find, as some think they do here, a "gradual return from a state of trance or rapture to the normal waking condition." On the contrary, the tone is increased in sublimity at the very last, by "the final harmonies of a general utterance;" as it has been well said, "The *Spirit* and the *Bride* unite their voices there for the first time" (ver. 17). And in the closing verse we have a most intimate dialogue

between the Lord and all his saints—his whole Church, after which John indeed closes this book, with the simple customary benediction which closes other books and epistles.

But we must express our conviction that the 7th verse does not rank amongst the express utterances of the Lord Jesus from heaven. Rather we hold that the Lord is speaking to John, by the spirit of inspiration, both in ver. 7, 12, 16-20; and thus sets again a *threefold* seal to those former words, so often resounding throughout his epistles to the Churches, "*Behold, I come quickly*" (iii. 11). It is only in ver. 8 that John, in a simple, touching alternation, names himself, as he did at the beginning (i. 19): "And I John saw these things and heard them." Further, he has to own his repeated human weakness: He fell down before the feet of the angel who showed him these things,—showed him the mystic Babylon, as well as the bride, the heavenly city; who thus, we see, as the last of the seven last angels, remained with him to the end; so that, according to the plan of the book, it is actually out of the last vial of wrath, or rather (as we saw in chap. xvii. 1) out of the vials collectively, that the glory has sprung. And now we proceed to the *last* angelic address, which includes ver. 9, 10, and possibly ver. 11 also.

Again, John is ready to worship; again the angel forbids it, repeating his former words, though, as we shall see, with some alteration. Let it be duly observed how impressively this second refusal to be worshipped occurs here. In the last words uttered by an angel in holy writ, he places himself on a perfect equality with us, in the sight of that God whom he and we alike worship.

"*See thou do it not; for I am thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the*

*sayings of this book: worship God.*”—Instead of those who have the testimony of Jesus, we have here the more brief expression, akin to ver. 9, the *prophets*, whereby this future-revealing angel modestly intimates that he also may be classed among the prophets, among those whom John calls his brethren the prophets. But, in order to extend as widely as possible this fellowship and equality in the sight of God, he adds, *and of those who keep*, hold fast, and more (as a consequence), *obey*, put into practice the words of this book, which again reminds us of the interpolated words of the Lord in ver. 7. Thus the whole chapter is one chain, with alternate voices as its separate links. We now see how correctly we interpreted the angel's speech in chap. xix. 10, as including the *understanding* of the prophecies in the testimony to Jesus. But, finally, we have also to learn that this prophetic understanding must spring from the keeping, the keeping close, the cherishing the *words* which are written here; or to speak with still greater precision, that *this* book of the Revelation of John is the key to all the prophets, and that thus they who read it correctly are made *brothers* to those former prophets, and to John also.

Again we have, “*And he saith unto me;*” because each word is now a special termination. If in chap. x. 4 we heard the voice from heaven command the exceptional *sealing up*; the angel, on the other hand, has twice reminded John *not* to seal up, *i. e.*, to write. It is announced with regard to this book, that all seeing and hearing is now at an end, that, according to the injunction given at first, and often repeated, the writing down may begin. But to the threefold command already given (see chap. xiv. 13; xix. 9; xxi. 5), the angel will not add the same word—*write*. Rather, he will express the same meaning by a reference to the end of that prophetic book of the Old

Testament, which is more closely related to this book of Revelation than any other, *i.e.*, the book of Daniel. As we find there, in chap. xii. 4, 9, that the angel commanded the prophet to seal up the words till the time of the end, so here, on the contrary, this New Testament end of time being come, the angel now says : “ *Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand.*” To Daniel it is said, “ Shut thou up the vision, for it shall be for many days” (viii. 26) ; but here we read, *the time is at hand*,—in what sense we have already explained.

There remains now the following verse, respecting which it is not easy to decide very positively whether it is a continuation of the angel’s speech, or whether it belongs to that of the Lord Jesus in the twelfth verse. If the word *and* which we find both in the German and English translations were correct, there could be no doubt upon the subject, but we believe it to be an erroneous reading, and that in point of fact, ver. 12 begins with “ *Behold,*” in the same way as ver. 7 ; to which it may be added, that ver. 11 as well as ver. 6, both appear to accord with Daniel, whereas ver. 12 seems to have its origin in Isa. xl. 10 ; lx. 11.

According then to this exposition, we have as the *last* words recorded in holy writ as spoken by an angel to the sons of men : *He that is unjust, let him do injustice still ; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still ; and he that is righteous, let him do righteousness still ; and he that is holy, let him be holy still.* This in its fundamental idea resembles Dan. xii. 10, and although its close connexion with the following verse, which has led to the introduction of the word *and*, is such as to occasion some perplexity, we believe, as we have before said, that the angel is permitted to go on speaking these words till the Lord himself



finally breaks in with might in the twelfth verse. The wicked who will not be converted will wax worse and worse (2 Tim. iii. 13), in like manner as the righteous and the holy will become increasingly so by *doing righteousness*.

In this last expression we have an idiom peculiarly characteristic of John's own style (1 John ii. 29; iii. 7). That the pure angel should speak of sinful men as impure, filthy, seems to be exceedingly natural, and in so doing, he probably intends to contrast them with the cleanliness, the purity which we find specially dwelt on in chap. iii. 4, 5; vii. 14. *The unrighteousness*, which at first appears to refer more especially to offences against others, is at the same time *impurity* with regard to its influence on a man's own character; he who doeth unrighteousness *stains* and *defiles* himself reflectively, just as he who doeth righteousness *purifies* himself, sanctifies himself still further thereby. The meaning of the whole passage may be summed up in the words of the parable (Matt. xiii. 30), "let both grow together until the harvest!" Not indeed, that it is to be regarded merely in the light of a prophecy, for the two last clauses doubtless contain both exhortation and encouragement for the righteous. Yet, on the other hand, the sinner is not to suppose that he is any way here exhorted to go on sinning, although the words contain an intimation that the unrighteous and impure, who will not turn, will be suffered to go on in their own way, left to reap the punishment which is the inevitable consequence of sin.

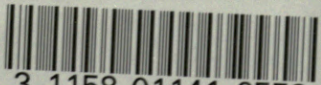
In like manner we find the apostle Paul writing (1 Cor. xiv. 38), "If any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant!" That John himself uses this language ironically, we cannot for a moment suppose. But the holy severity, the uncompromising truth of the words in the mouth of the gracious and condescending angel, afford us a most decisive testi-

mony to the *freedom of the human will*, and so to the righteousness of God's judgment. This is also illustrated on its brighter side by the appeal in the seventeenth verse, where the loving invitation of Jesus given at the last to all, whosoever they be, who will come and *take freely*, harmonizes with, and completes the significance of the solemn words that close the angelic sayings.



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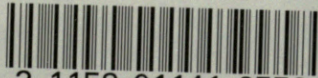
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